

"EMILY DICKINSON (A STUDY IN THE ROMANTIC PERSPECTIVE)"

Thesis

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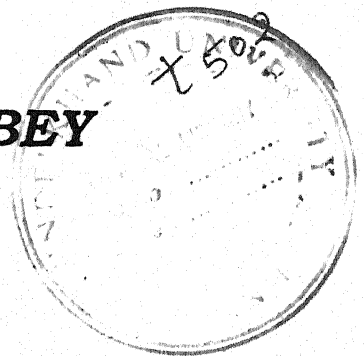
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By

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**Under the Supervision
of**

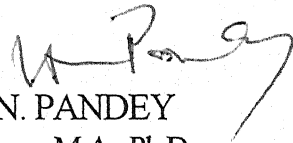
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This is to certify that Smt. Reena Dubey has fulfilled all conditions laid down by the University for submitting the thesis. She has worked under me for more than three years continuously.

The whole work is a piece of research characterized by fresh interpretation of facts available. The thesis is the outcome of candidate's own reading. It is marked by profound critical insight and just gives completely a radical view of her works. It is in its proper form.

In my view the thesis is suitable for publication. I wish her all success.



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CHAPTER - I

INTRODUCTION

Of all modern American poets, Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) occupies a distinctive place by virtue of her metaphysical bent of mind, staunch autobiographical touch and lively romantic strain. Though she was a romantic in her ideal approach to life and letters, she shows signs of modernity in her form and style. In most of her life, she lived the life of a recluse, completely cut-off from the contemporary literary developments and political events. She had not read Whitman, though the latter was the leading poet of his time. Coupled with this, she had met disappointment in her love-affairs. These various facets of her life were accepted by her to lead a secluded personal life, and a sensitive woman leading such a life was well-suited, by her temper and destiny, to become a romantic pouring out her heart in lovely lyrics and small songs. This is what the noted scholar, Robert P. Spiller suggests when he remarks:

For Emily Dickinson (1830-1886), retreat was into the absolute. The recluse of Amherst, Massachusetts, became one of the great poets of all time, and perhaps the greatest of all time, and perhaps the greatest of all women poets, without stirring from her garden in the quiet New England town.¹

Dickinson's 'retreat' and her turning a 'recluse' should be seen in the light of her self-search. When the Prophet of Nature, Wordsworth, started writing his poetry, especially *The Prelude* (1850), he termed it 'The Growth of a Poet's Mind', meaning thereby the growth of his own mind.

As we know, a shift is to be marked from the social plane of Neo-classical poetry to the individual plane of Romantic poetry. In the words of the distinguished critic, Graham Hough:

Those who feel that man is most himself in society will probably get their greatest poetical satisfaction from the poetry of other ages. Those who feel that man is most himself in solitude ... will naturally turn to the poetry of the romantic age.²

Thus, the Romantic poetry tends to be largely personal and individualistic, and Dickinson falls in line with it in a perceptible way.

Emily Dickinson's poetry has been studied from different angles. These angles are the different approaches to it and we shall take stock of them here and now.

(A) A Critical Study of Different Approaches to the

Poetry of Emily Dickinson

Different approaches to her poetry have been adopted by Dickinson's critics. Though in the nineteenth century she had received scanty attention, in the twentieth century so many critics have have studied her in book-form as well as in articles and papers. Even doctoral dissertations have been written and are being written upon her poetry.

The entire criticism on Dickinson may be divided into three broad categories — textual criticism, interpretative criticism and biographical criticism. Textual approach to her poetry brings the reader closer to the text of the poems, and brings him to an awareness of the problems

connected with it, such as spelling, punctuation, metrical devices, different versions of the text, emendation and editorial issues. Interpretative approach to her poetry is devoted to interpreting the work of a poet against the background of the age and the circumstances of life. And biographical approach deals with the facets of life to be found in ore.

Textual Approach

After Dickinson's death in 1886, her sister Wavinia discovered nearly half of the total output of Emily's poetry. Wavinia sought the help of Mabel Woonis Todd, wife of a Professor at Amherst who was also a poet, in bringing out Emily's poetry to the public notice. Madame Todd approached Thomas Wentworth Higginson in keeping Emily's memory alive. Mrs. Todd and Colonel Higginson published Poems by Emily Dickinson in 1890. This volume contained only 115 poems out of 900 poems in Wavinia's possession. The editors withheld those poems which they thought would repel the public. For this, they made liberal editorial changes in the text of the poems. They removed odd and impolite words, uncouth provincialism, incorrect grammar, smoothed rhyme. But it is questionable that they could charge her style with life. They, however, succeeded in arousing public interest in Emily's poetry, and more of her poetry came out under the title Poems : Second Series in 1891. Mrs. Todd also edited and published Letters of Emily Dickinson in 1894, and in 1896 she brought out Poems : Third Series, having 449 poems in it.

In the twentieth century, Dickinson's niece Martha Dickinson Bianchi published her selected poems under the title The Single Hound (1914). By now, the public "had come to appreciate the quality of

Dickinson's originalities",³ despite some of her oddities and peculiarities. Later on, Biamchi released more of Emily's poems in her possession as Further Poems (1929) and Unpublished Poems (1935). The appearance of Poets of Melody (1945), prepared by Mrs. Todd and her daughter Millicent Todd Bingham, completed the publication of Emily's poetry.

Now, the time was ripe to present the Dickinson poetry in an unreconstructed text and with some degree of chronological arrangement. In 1950, the ownership of Emily Dickinson's literary estate was transferred to the Harvard University, and the editing began on the variorum text of The Poems of Emily Dickinson. The task of editing was entrusted to Thomas H. Johnson, who prepared it in three volumes for the Belknap Press of Harvard University, comprising a total of 1975 poems and fragments. Johnson's later edition was The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, which is not essentially different from the 1955 Variorum Edition. Speaking of this latter edition, Johnson writes :

I have silently corrected obvious misspelling (witheld, visiter, etc.), and misplaced apostrophes (does'nt). Punctuation and capitalization remain unaltered. Dickinson used dashes as a musical "device, and though some may be elongated and stops, any "correction" would be gratuitous. Capitalization, though after capricious, is likewise untouched.⁴

(II) Interpretative Approach

It was Thomas Wentworth Higginson who discovered Miss Dickinson as a poet in 1862, and after about thirty years (precisely in

1890) he introduced her poems to the reading public. Emily did not dare to approach Emerson for his opinion about her poems. She wrote to Higginson in one of her letters thus :

Are you too deeply occupied to say if my Verse is alive? ...
Should you think it breathed ...⁵

But apparently, Higginson was not much pleased with her four poems that she had sent to him for his scrutiny. In July, 1862, she wrote to him again as follows:

Will you tell me my fault, frankly as to yourself, for I had rather wince than die. Men do not call the surgeon, to commend — the Bone, but to set it, Sir, and fracture within, is more critical. And for this, Preceptor, I shall bring you — obedience — the Blossom from my Garden, and every gratitude I know. Perhaps you smile at me. I could not stop for that — My Business is Circumference — An ignorance⁶

It is obvious that Higginson was sympathetic towards Emily and praised her poetry whenever he had an occasion. He observed that Emily's poetry had 'flashes of wholly original and profound insight into nature and life'. In one place, he wrote : "Wayward and unconventional in the last degree; defiant of form, measure, rhyme, and even grammar; she yet had an executive standard of her own, and would wait many days for a word that satisfied."⁷ But on the whole, the Dickinson criticism of the nineteenth century remained mostly hostile and unresponsive. An anonymous reviewer for the Wonder Daily News reacted like this : "There are no

words that can say how bad poetry may be when it is divorced from meaning, from music, from grammar, from rhyme; in brief, from articulate and intelligible speech".⁸ And writing about Emily's poems in America, dated 8th January 1891, Maurice Thompson remarked in this manner :

Her vision was clear and surprisingly accurate, but her touch was erratic and at frequent intervals nerveless, while her sense of completeness was singularly dull. She exaggerated the faults of Emerson's verse-style into absurdity.⁹

Another scholar, Andrew Lang, commented on Emily's first collection of poems thus:

... if poetry is to exist at all, it really must have form and grammar, and must rhyme when it professes to rhyme. The wisdom of the ages and the nature of man insist on so much.¹⁰

Here Lang is critical of the poetic practice of Emily Dickinson.

But with the dawn of the twentieth century, the tone of criticism changes for the better. Theodore Spencer, for one, admires the qualities of 'concentration' and 'intensity' in Emily's poetry. Writing for the New England Quarterly (July, 1929), he remarked: "... concentration and intensity are the characteristics of Emily Dickinson's poetry which rightly place her among the two or three greatest women poets."¹¹ In his "A Centennial Appraisal" (to be had in Emily Dickinson : A Bibliography, 1930), George F. Whicher observed as follows :

Emily Dickinson ... was concerned to demonstrate the sovereignty of God or the beneficence of Nature. Her desire was simply to present a faithful, uncolored report of her mental experiences.¹²

F.O. Matthiessen in his essay, "The Private Poet : Emily Dickinson" (published in the Kenyon Review of Autumn, 1945), discovered a close affinity between Emily's spirit and form and he fully appreciated it — "her few delicate yet full-blooded marriages between spirit and form".¹³ And Thomas H. Johnson opined that "Emily Dickinson was a dedicated artist, shy, cloistered, fugitive perhaps"¹⁴

The publication of the Variorum Edition of Emily's poems by the Harvard University in 1955 has hastened the pace of criticism on her poetry. She is now variously studied as a transcendentalist, as a mystic poet (like Blake), as a psychological poet, as a romantic poet, and so on and so forth. So many articles and papers, books and theses are being written on her. A critic like John Crowe Ransom tries to restore her to her proper place, while another like R.P. Blackmur was eager to place her in the New England tradition.

(III) Biographical Approach

Some scholars have made interesting studies of Emily's Dickinson's poetry by tracing personal or biographical elements in it. In this context, we may mention Millicent Todd Bingham's book, Emily Dickinson's Home (1955) is an important work; it throws sufficient light on Emily's family relationships home-life, and friends. Austin Warren justly commends Mrs. Bingham's central chapters.¹⁵ The same year saw the publication Thomas H. Johnson's valuable work, Emily Dickinson : An Interpretative Biography. This work is divided into three parts, and deals

exclusively with Emily's life and achievements. Johnson clarifies his design of the work in this way :

The first section discourses on the traditions into which she was born and presents the persons whom she knew well. The second views the artist at work and the impulses that stirred her mind and spirit. The last allows the poetry itself to reveal the artist.¹⁶

Johnson acknowledges his indebtedness to two previous biographers of Miss Dickinson — George Frisbie Whicher, who wrote This Was a Poet (New York : Scribner, 1939), and Richard Chase, who published Emily Dickinson (New York : William Stoane Associates, Qnc., 1951). In 1960, Jay Leyda brought out his two-volume work on The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson, which “expanded the scholarly and factual approach to the biographical problem.”¹⁷ Another interesting biographical study is Theodora Ward's The Capsule of the Mind : Chapters in the life of Emily Dickinson (1961). These various biographical works have revealed the hidden truths about Miss. Emily's life and art.

(B) The Novelty and Freshness of the Approach

The Romantic approach to a study of Emily Dickinson's poetry is a challenging one and it is full of novelty and freshness. It is so because Miss Dickinson is usually known as metaphysical and mystical poet. As a mystical poet, she recalls the poetic practice of William Blake, and as a metaphysical poet she stands close to Donne and his school. If her content is visionary and transcendental, her form is intricate and intriguing. So, she is not an easy poet to approach. Even the Romantic approach to her is

likely to meet objections from a traditional reader of society. But Emily is not a traditional writer. She does belong to the nineteenth century poetic tradition of America, and yet she possesses an ample measure of modernity and originality. This is how Harold Bloom writes about her:

Of all poets writing in English in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, I judge Emily Dickinson to present us with the most authentic cognitive difficulties. Vast and subtle intellect cannot in itself make a poet; the essential qualities are inventiveness, mastery of trope and craft, and that weird flair for intuitive significance through rhythm to which we can give no proper name. Dickinson has all these, as well as a mind so original and powerful that we scarcely have begun, even now, to catch up with her.¹⁸

Bloom characterises Dickinson's originality as 'originality at its strongest' and groups her together with the Yahwists, Plato, Shakespeare and Freud. It is a sign of her originality that she can be transcendental, mystical, modern and still a romantic.

And if we call Miss Dickinson a 'romantic', she is so not because she initiated the Romantic poets of England or America but because she showed parallels of theme, emotion and thought at times. Of course, she was familiar with some of Romantic writings, especially those of Byron. But there is nothing to suggest that she derived anything from Byron — in fact, anything from any writer, but for Emerson — or from any other Romantic poet. Wordsworth might have delighted her with his mystical leanings towards nature and life.

Emily Dickinson's treatment of nature and childhood is quite closer to that of the Romantic poets. Nature is a source of perennial pleasure for the Romantics imbued with a sharp fancy and heightened imagination. Miss Emily also wrote a good number poems on these themes and exulted in watching 'the meadows groves and hills' and the unmixed innocence of childhood. This practice of hers brings her nearer to a great Romantic poet like Wordsworth, who has celebrated nature in poems like "The Solitary Reaper", "Tintern Abbey", "The Education of Nature" and Lucy poems, and who has treated childhood in "Ode on Intimations of Immortality". That is why a critic of the stature of Henry W. Wells is prompted to remark thus :

The contrasted seeds of mysticism and stoicism took root in Emily's mind not only because of her own personality, but through a congenial ground prepared for them by romantic sensibility. From a remote past ultimately came the two of her most precious heritages.¹⁹

For her romantic sensibility, we have to take up a poem like "By the Sea" which celebrates both nature and childhood :

I started early — took my dog —
And visited the Sea —
The Mermaids in the basement
Came out to look at me.²⁰

This poem pictures a child who goes to the sea. The child's journey to the sea is symbolic of man's love of nature. The 'Mermaids' from the

underworld came out to welcome the child. The frigates on the sea extend their welcome too. Onward in the poem, the tide tenderly touches the body of the child. Thus, the child is now in close touch with Nature. Images like 'Dew upon a Dandelion's sleeve' and 'my shoes would overflow with Pearl' are typically romantic in their imaginative fervour.

Another romantic poem by Dickinson is the following (Poem 6):

Frequently the woods are pink —

Frequently are brown.

Frequently the hills undress

Behind my native town.²¹

In describing the objects of nature — woods, hills and native town — the poet shows his propensity for beautiful scenes and sights.

Dickinson's Calvinistic bent of mind brings her to what is called 'dark Romanticism', — the kind of romanticism represented by Byron. 'Bright Romanticism', like Transcendentalism, is guided by an optimistic belief in human soul in communion with beneficent Nature. Poets like Wordsworth, Scott, and Bryant are associated with this kind of Romanticism. 'Dark Romanticism' does not uphold such a communion between the two, and is represented by writers like Byron, Goethe, Metville and Poe. It is 'Dark Romanticism' that attracted Emily Dickinson and she shared many features of it with Byron. Both of them were rebels at heart. Like Byron she had a restless state of mind.

Thus, Dickinson shows her romantic sensibility in her poetry. And this 'sensibility' is reflected in her philosophic stance, her modes of

expression, and her rebellious temperament. Though she is not a part of historical Romanticism, she is a romantic by her themes, emotions and evocative images. To approach Miss Dickinson as a romantic is definitely a novel and fresh approach.

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CHAPTER II

THE CONCEPT OF ROMANTICISM AND EMILY DICKINSON

If the concept of Classicism is linked with wit and reason, the concept of Romanticism is closely associated with fancy and imagination. In truth imagination or what Matthew Arnold called 'liberal imagination', is the hallmark of Romantic poetry. In this context, C.M. Bowra remarks thus:

...if we wish to distinguish a single characteristic which differentiates the English Romantics from the poets of the eighteenth century, it is to be found in the importance which they attached to the imagination and in the special view which they took of it.¹

It is the power of the poet's imagination that enables him to perceive unity in diversity to bring the diverse elements (observed by the senses) to harmonious whole, and to synthesise the opposites. It is this power that sees 'the light that never was on earth or sea', it is this power that according to Wordsworth, creates a "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings recollected in tranquillity".² We find an ample measure of imagination in Dickinson's poetry.

(a) Romanticism : A Distilled Essence

As stated above, the core of Romanticism is 'the liberalisation of imagination'. That's why Jean Jacques Rousseau, the well-known French thinker, called it 'liberalism in literature'. Another famous literary figure

Walter Pater, termed it 'the renaissance of wonder' and this element of 'wonder' is awakened in a work of art when the poet is able to yoke together 'strangeness to beauty'. A romantic work is bound to contain a sense of awe and wonder and strangeness in it. Even Wordsworth has indirectly hinted at it when he writes in his famous poem, "The Solitary Reaper" thus:

Will no one tell me what she sings? Perhaps the plaintive numbers
flow.

For old, unhappy, far-off things,

And battles long ago:

Or is it some more humble lay,

Familiar matter of today?

Some natural sorrow, loss, or pain,

That has been, and may be again?³

Of these two stanzas by Wordsworth, the first one abounds in awe, wonder and strangeness before it tells us about certain themes of Romantic poetry.

According to Wordsworth, Romantic poetry deals with "old, unhappy, far-off things / And battles long ago". Here it is clearly hinted that Romanticism takes to old and distant things having a tinge of unhappiness or melancholy; that it celebrates the 'battles' fought in the remote past; and that it dwells on some 'familiar matter of today' or on 'some natural sorrow, loss, or pain' (as the second stanza mentions).

R. A. Scott-James is of the view that Jean-Jacques Rousseau is the progenitor of the Romantic movement in the first-half of the nineteenth

century. What Rousseau challenges is not Literature, but Society. His life and writings were a protest against “the stereotyped order of the word”.⁴ He demands the freedom of man, not the freedom of the artist : ‘Man was born free, and everywhere he is in chains’. His writing is free, impassioned, of the heart, not of the head (as the classicist wrote); in other words, it is romantic. His romanticism challenged the established order of society in all its aspects — government, law, religion, customs and conventions. All credit to him for having swept France, may the whole of Europe, with his valuable doctrines. Scott-James rightly points out that both the French Revolution and the literary Romantic movement were “products of the same intellectual ferment”.⁵ This intellectual ferment did not spare England and America in its expansion. In England Rousseau found his disciples in Wordsworth (who had lived in France during the days of upheaval) and Coleridge, and in America Emerson, Thoreau and Dickinson carried forward his ideal and doctrines.

The quintessence of Romanticism is decidedly a spirit of revolt and an impulse of adventure . Drawing a dividing line between Classicism and Romanticism, Scott -James writes in some detail:

Form, outward form, is the first distinctive element in classicism, and on this beauty of outward appearance, with its attributes of symmetry, balance, order, proportion, reserve, it takes its stand. And as contrasted with this the romantic tends to emphasize the spirit which lies behind form The first tends always to emphasize the “this-worldliness of the beauty that we know; the second, its “other-worldliness”. For the first, these , “the proper study of

mankind is man," whilst the second, in the pursuit of the soul, looks for it in strange and unknown places, and in the wilder scenes of Nature..... The one seeks always a mean; the other an extremity. Repose satisfies the classic; adventure attracts the Romantic. The one appeals to tradition; the other demands the novel. On the one side we may range the virtues and defects which go with the notions of fitness, propriety, measure, restraint, conservatism, authority, calm, experience, comeliness; on the other, those which are suggested by excitement, energy, restlessness, spirituality, curiosity, troublousness, progress, liberty, experiment, provocativeness.⁶

Here Romanticism is examined as a contrast to Classicism in the domain of literature.

As a literary movement, Romanticism marked a profound shift in sensibility as well as in poetic diction. In Britain, the trumpet of this shift was blown by Wordsworth and Coleridge with the publication of The Lyrical Ballads in 1798. The collaborators in this momentous joint venture were men of talent, and they emphasized the role of 'organic sensibility' in a work of art. Sensibility is the proper synthesis of 'thought' and 'feeling', and the 'organic sensibility' brings the poet or artist nearer to a seer,— one endowed with lofty thought and vision. Dante, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Donne, and Blake were all endowed with it in remarkable manner. Wordsworth and Coleridge were also gifted with the creative powers of an artist, with the 'organic sensibility' of seer and a visionary.

It would be in place to mention here that the popular term for 'sensibility' used by Wordsworth and Coleridge is, more or less,

‘imagination’. Speaking of ‘imagination’, Wordsworth states that it is ‘creative’ and fuses all things into one, making them ‘take one colour and serve to one effect’, and that its creations are sublime, not merely beautiful (which is produced by ‘fancy’). Coleridge is subtler than Wordsworth in his analysis of ‘imagination’. He finds two forms of ‘imagination’—primary and secondary. The primary imagination is merely the power of perceiving the objects of senses — persons, places and things. It enables the mind to form a clear picture of the object perceived by the senses. In fact, it is an involuntary act of the mind in the face of a mingled mass of matter; in its function, it is an unconscious effort. But the secondary imagination is the conscious use of the power of perceiving the objects. It is a composite faculty of the soul, comprising the faculties of perception, intellect, will, and emotion. Thus, the secondary imagination is a more active agent than the primary imagination. It “dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate”⁷ It is a ‘shaping and modifying power’. Its ‘plastic stress’ enables the objects to emerge fashioned in its own likeness. For one thing, Coleridge tries to discover “the seminal principle”⁸ This is what George Watson suggests in his treatise, The Literary Critics, when he observes:

For all the diversity of Coleridge’s criticism, we may safely begin by asserting that its object is not analysis, but a theoretical certainty — ‘to reduce criticism to a system’⁹

So, Coleridge is concerned with ‘the principles of writing’.

The distilled essence of Romanticism may be summed up as follows : as a literary movement it signalled a marked change in

‘sensibility’ (also in ‘poetic diction’ — note that in his remarkable lyrics and sonnets Wordsworth uses the language of simple men as they really use it); intellectually it marked a violent reaction to the Enlightenment; politically it was inspired by the revolutions in America and France; and emotionally it expressed an assertion of the ‘self’ and the value of individual experience; morally, it cultivated the sense of the infinite and the transcendental; and socially it championed the progressive causes. Stylistically, its keynote is intensity or passion. And undoubtedly, its Watchword is ‘Imagination’.

(b) Romanticism and Nineteenth-Century American Poetic Tradition

Romanticism was not confined to Britain or Europe alone; it also went across the Atlantic and affected the New England writers in particular. Some of the notable New England writers who were in the grip of Romantic ideals were Edwards, Emerson, Thoreau, and Dickinson. It is on record that Dickinson was greatly influenced by Emerson, who rigorously pleaded for the ‘Self-Reliant’ Man. Emerson was also concerned with the Infinite and the Transcendental. He with Thoreau and Whitman and Alcott formed a potential group of writers, who generally known as ‘the Transcendentalists’. New England was the humming centre of literary activity, and Emily Dickinson was an integral part of it. Like Emerson, another great idealist writer, Thoreau, had also influenced Dickinson. In this connection, the noted critic Albert Gelpi writes thus : “For Emily Dickinson’s indebtedness to Thoreau we have fewer hard facts to point to than in the case of Emerson, but circumstantial evidence intimates a great deal”¹¹ And a little onward again : “Emily must have

felt a deep kinship with Thoreau for a passing reference to provoke so spontaneous and wholehearted a response to a stranger".¹² Apart from these two great literary personalities, Transcendentalism which grew on the soil of New England (Emily's own province), also affected the poetess to a great extent. She had read some of Theodore Parker and later O.B. Prothingham's biography of Parker, and she knew enough of William Ellery Channing and quoted a verse of his as the basis for her own poem.¹³ She had evidently absorbed the essential features of Transcendentalism — its optimism, its emphasis upon experimentation and originality, its sense of social purpose, its metaphysical and mystical speculations, and its pulse of rhythm and imagery.¹⁴

Emily Dickinson's girlhood friend, Emily Fowler Ford, informs us that as early as the mid-1840s they were reading Byron, Lowell, Emerson, Motherwell and Margaret Fuller, and that the poetess was particularly immersed in Emerson's Essays.¹⁵ One of Emily Dickinson's Amherst (her place of residence) friends named Weonard Humphrey was much interested in Wordsworth and Carlyl.¹⁶

Emily was a curious child from the very beginning. In April 1850 (when she was barely twenty), she received Emerson's Poems from Benjamin Newton, and wrote a long letter to her friend Jane Humphrey in which she expressed a special sense of dedication to her poetry. By 1851, she was bold enough to appropriate to herself the title of a poet. During the Fifties, she started searching for a style of her own. This style turned out to be 'keenly perceived and crisply phrased, abounding in 'the exuberant excess'. By 1858, she felt sufficiently sure of her sight and

insight and of her technique to begin recopying verses and preserving them in bound packets".¹⁷ She now wrote poems on various subjects — on nature, states of feelings, art of poetry; poems on love, death and immortality. By the early Sixties, the design of her art was set; and the rest of her life was 'on elaboration and a perfection' of it.

The nineteenth-century American poetic tradition continued, for the most part, in the older patterns, and poets like Longfellow, Bryant, Holmes, Lowell, Emerson and Whittier were still active, even after the war. These poets became the models for a host of inferior poets, such as Richard Henry Stoddard (1825-1903), Bayard Taylor (1825-1878), Edmund Clarence Stedman (1833-1903), Thomas Bailey Aldrich (1836-1907), and Richard Watson Gilder (1849-1909). Even Moody and Crane, who were brilliant at time in their eloquence, followed the traditional path in their poetic form. Of course, Whitman was an exception with his inventive technique and form, but he was generally ignored by the public. A compatriot-poet, Sidney Lanier, charged that "Whitman is poetry's butcher. Huge raw collops slashed from the rump of poetry, and never mind gristle — is what Whitman feeds our souls with"¹⁹, though he himself composed poems in free verse. Lanier thought that Whitman was at his best when he wrote "O Captain, My Captain" because in it he had abandoned 'his theory of formlessness and writes in form'. Lanier, it is said, was a power of 'individual tastes and talents'. He loved the Elizabethans and used many images and conceits like them. He was a musician, and attached much importance to the use of musical rhythms in his poetry.

Emily Dickinson was a great talent in the 19th century American poetry, but she did not publish more than three or four poems in her lifetime. She was a contemporary of Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882). She began writing poetry in the mid-fifties — the same time as that of Whitman's Leaves of Grass — and continued to do so until her death in 1886. She was innocent of all literary theories, just as she was of all the current events and social developments. As a poet, she diverged from conventional modes of writing and evolved her own unusual style plagued with dots and dashes. This style is “a cryptic style” characterized by “a delicate bombardment of parable and whim”, as Conrad Aiken puts it.¹⁹ This is the style of an unusually shy yet talented poetess of Amherst, Massachusetts.

(C) Dickinson's Indebtedness to the Romantic Cult

By temperament, Dickinson was suited to be a Romantic poet. In this matter, she follows the direction of the British romantics, Wordsworth and Coleridge, and that of the American authors like Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman. Of all these authors, Dickinson was akin to Emerson in tone and temper in divine dream and metaphysics, dual vision of life and death, of nature and soul, of matter and spirit, of understanding and reason. Emerson was her contemporary, and at the height of his career, living only sixty miles away. His poems came out when she was just seventeen. In her self-imposed seclusion, she fell an easy prey to “the then current Emersonian doctrine of mystical individualism”.²⁰ She was as conscious of her thought as of her person. She enjoyed being something of a mystery, and sometimes she gloats over it. In Dickinson's poetry, we come the

Emersonian individualism. Emerson referred to the world as 'a divine dream, from which we may presently awake', and Dickinson writes in one of her poems : 'Reality is a dream from which but a portion of mankind have yet waked...' If Emerson urged self-knowledge and self-reliance as virtues of an individual, Dickinson exhorts her poetic persona thus :

Soto! Explore thyself!
 Therein thyself shalt find
 The 'Undiscovered Continent' —
 No settler had the Mind.²¹

(Poem 832).

Emerson perceived the world as an emblem of the 'web of God', Dickinson sees things as 'trembling Emblems' and feels the movement of an unseen Weaver.

There lurks a sense of loss and nostalgia in Dickinson's poetry, and this brings her close to the Romantic poets — Shelley and Keats in particular. This sense of loss creates a void in her personal world, an inviolable emptiness. It is closely linked with the loss of childhood, father, mother, and lover. This is how she writes :

A loss of something ever felt I —
 The first that I could recollect
 Bereft I was — of what I knew not

(Poem 959; p.448).

In truth, she sought after something loved and lost through her interior waste land.

If many of the Romantic prophets did not share Emily's experience of darkness, they confirmed and defined for her experience of overwhelming brightness. Her illumination is an emanation from or a confirmation of the Divine presence. So vital is the illumination that Emily tries time and again to make stubborn words render some sense of His glory. This is how she writes :

'Tis this — invites — appalls — endows —
 Flits — glimmers — proves — dissolves —
 Returns — suggests — convicts — enchants —
 Than — flings in Paradise —

(Poem 673; p.334).

Shelly became melancholy very often; Keats longed for an unattainable beauty; Tennyson, Arnold, Houseman, Hopkins, and Hardy were frequently sad and pensive in their poetry. But Emily braves the odds of life with an exemplary courage and obduracy, and remains 'bright' even in the midst of dark days of deprivation and destitution.

For most of the Romantics, Nature served as intermediary between self and Deity. Among Emily's earliest poems, there is a charming evocation of a very special summer day :

A something in a summer's Day
 As slow her flambeaux burn away
 Which solemnizes me.

A something in a summeres's noon —
 A depth — an Azure — a perfume —
 Transcending ecstasy.

(Poem 122; p.57)

In one of her letters to Higginson (dated August 1862), she tried to explain to him about her 'vision', and then she spoke of the 'noise-less noise in the Orehard', of the stopping of breath 'in the Core of the Woods', of the sight of the chestnut tree that made the skies blossom for her, and finally of the wood visited by Angels.²² If 'the dark woods' were lovely for Robert Frost, they were no less fascinating to Emily. As a child, she was forbidden by her elders to enter the woods because of venomous snakes and flowers but later on she found them merely inviting and alluring.

Emily loved Nature because it was the medium to approach God or the Wife Spirit. There are many poems in which the poetess invents images for the indefinable fusion of matter and spirit, such as in the following:

'Tis Compound Vision —
 Light — enabling Light —
 The Finite — furnished
 With the Infinite —
 Convex — and Concave Witness —
 Back — towards Time —
 And forward —
 Toward the God of Him —

(Poem 906; p.428).

Here, a beautiful blending of the finite and the Infinite, matter and spirit, is suggested. As a Nature poet, Emily was able to break upon the dark inner void with a 'bright' strain of the Romantic spirit, — the spirit of which "Wordsworth and Scott are good examples in England, and Bryant, Emerson, and Whitman in America."²³ Emily loved Nature in all its manifestations (to which we shall return in Chapter III). It is enough to point out here that she was a fine flower of Romantic sensibility.

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_____ Gelpi writes thus : "Emily gave some idea of Emerson's influence upon her own thought in her comments on the Poems, Representative Men, and the Holmes biography, and in several allusions to his "immortal" poems.

And on p.42 of this quoted critical work, we have : "In her last years she copied out several scraps of Emerson's verse" (Gelpi).

11. Ibid, p. 42

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CHAPTER - III

A DETAILED STUDY IN THE DICKINSONIAN ROMANTICSTRAIN : A STUDY IN THEMES

As we have seen in the previous two chapters, Emily Dickinson comes out as a poet of Romantic sensibility at least in some degree. She does not follow or echo any Romantic poet in particular. But she comes close to the Romantic poets in her lyricism, her subjectivism, her individualism, her tone and temper, her content and themes. She waxes eloquent over her joys and sorrows, over her ecstasy and pain. The noted scholar, Henry W. Wells, rightly remarks about her that "...Emily remains far from wholly Romantic" and that "the whole of Romanticism in the historical sense is not to be traced in her own work".¹ Wells's remarks tend to clarify Emily's position as a poet. Emily's romantic strain is so evident in many of her poems. The romantic tendency of the poet leads her to 'the white heat' (to use her own words), to a nervous excitement, to an exuberance of emotionalism. Speaking of Emily's romantic sensibility, H.W. Wells observes as under:

This sensibility is a mental state both in life and art accentuating the emotional life.To the romantics, feeling became a badge of distinction, just as in the Restoration World "wit" was so regarded... Women kneaded their emotions into a refined state of sensitivity while men affected effeminacy.²

Thus, the expression of 'emotional life' or 'feeling' is the symptom of a truly romantic sensibility. Emily Dickinson expresses her 'emotional life'

in a number of her poems, and in this way she becomes a poet of romantic sensibility.

Dickinson employs various themes in her poetry. When we come to examine the romantic strain or tendency in it, it is quite natural that we take stock of her dominant themes, as they will determine the true nature of her verse. And her dominant or recurring themes are: subjective effusions or the egotistical strain, love of Nature, different shades of love, and transcendental thoughts. The last one includes Death and Immortality, Time and Eternity, Truth and Beauty. Hereafter we shall deal with these various themes one by one in some detail.

(A) The Egotistical Strain

In Dickinson's poetry we find a strong egotistical strain, an unmistakable touch of subjectivism. A number of her poems are composed on her own thoughts and feelings, her own situations and surroundings. They are well within her range of experience. They confirm her as an avowed recluse who has nothing to do with the external world and its happenings. Like Jane Austen in English fiction, she kept herself within that range and never ventured to step out of it. Social and political concerns of her times could not divert her attention from artistic pursuits. She was least interested in the outdoor activities, and mostly confined herself to her house and garden.

Dickinson was a mysterious lover of loneliness and solitude. Shutting herself off from the public world of hectic engagements, she heard the call of her soul, the promptings of her heart. Consequently, she became a fond

lover of homeliness and the private world. This is how she writes in one of her poems :

It might be lonelier
Without the Loneliness —
I', so accustomed to my Fate —
Perhaps the Other — Peace —³

In fact, she made Loneliness her life-long companion; it was her 'Fate' to discover 'peace' and solace there. Only in her hours of loneliness, she could commune with her soul, could explore the inner regions, and then feel immense peace of mind, free from turbulence of everyday life. In one of her poems, she writes as follows:

The Soul's Superior instants
Occur to Her — alone —
When friend — and Earth's occasion
Have infinite withdrawn —

(Poem 306; p.144).

Living in such loneliness, Dickinson could speak of herself with greater confidence than of others. She was fully conscious of this fact, as is evident from the following lines :

I cautions, scanned my little life —
I winnowed what would fade
From what would last till Heads like wine
Should be a - dreaming laid.

(Poem 178; p.84).

In such a life, pain or pleasure is immaterial. Miss Emily accepts both pain and pleasure in life, and writes about them frequently. Thus, in one of her poems, she says :

I can made Grief —
 Whole Pools of it —
 I'm used to that —
 But the least push of Joy
 Breaks up my feet —
 And I tip — drunken —
 Let no Pebble — smile —
 'Twas the New Liquor —
 That was all !

(Poem 252; p.115)

She is equally disciplined, be it pain or pleasure. If 'grief' sobers and restrains her, 'pleasure' makes her 'drunken' with excitement.

A large body of Dickinson's poetry remains lyrical and charged with emotion. It is then that she resembles the Romantic poets like Shelly, Byron and Keats. Her lyricism is best seen in her poems of love and death. It may be clearly marked in Poem 380, which begins as follows :

There is a flower that Bees prefer —
 And Butterflies — desire —
 To gain the Purple Democrat
 The Humming Bird — aspire —

(p.181)

and offers us the lines :

Her face be rounder than the Moon
 And ruddier than the Gown
 Of Orchis in the Pasture —
 Or Rhododendron — worn —
 She doth not wait for June—
 Before the World be Green—
 Her sturdy little Countenance—
 Against the Wind—be seen—
 (p.181).

Here the unwanted beauty of a flower— of a soft, sweet woman— is marvellously portratyed. The lines have a rush of lyrical nature. The poet has written them in an inspired from the world of Nature. Like the Romantics, she shows her great love of natural scenes and sights of birds, bees and butterflies, of flowers and leaves, of loveliness of months and seasons. Very often she describes s woman by drawing a comparison with a rose or a lily, as in the following lines:

She sped as Petals of a Rose
 Offended by the Wind—
 A frail Aristocrat of Time
 Indemnity to find—
 Leaving on nature— a Default
 As Cricket or as Bee—
 But Andes in the Bosoms where
 She had begun to lie—

(Poem 991; p.461).

Given on natural objects Dickinson transposes her own feelings and attitudes, as one can mark in the above passage.

Because of the egotistical nature of Dickinson's poetry, it usually tends to be candidly confessional in tone and essence. Confessional poetry, at its best, reveals the poet's mental and emotional life, without hiding any fact about it. It does not conceal even the ugly and the bizarre. The events in a poet's life are not so important as his reactions to them. The 'I' of Dickinson's poetry is not the 'I' that experienced the events or happenings, but the 'I' that responded to certain events or happenings. And it is in the poet's response to a certain event or situation that we can see his imagination working. The use of imagination is the distinctive trait of Romantic poetry. It is in this sense that Emily Dickinson is called a Romantic poet.

On closely examining Dickinson's poetry, we realise that it reveals her personality in an unmistakable way. A noted scholar like Clarke Griffith maintains that Dickinson's poetry is revelation of her personality from three different planes — the physical, the mental and the spiritual. Her poetry tells us a lot about her self, about her whims and freaks, about her mental and emotional disturbances. The following poem may be marked in this matter:

I fear a Man of frugal Speech —

I fear a Silent Man —

Harangner— I can overtake—

Or Babbler—entertain—

But He who weigheth — While the Rest —
 Expend their furthest pound —
 Of this Man — I am wary —
 I fear that He is Grand —

(Poem 5A3; p. 265).

Here the poet's fears are revealed frankly — that she is afraid of 'a man of frugal speech', of 'a silent man', of grand 'weigher'. In reality, it may be said that 'the poet is poetry' in case of Dickinson. Her voice is the voice of 'a private poet'. Her world is 'the private world'. Like a true poet of private utterance, she writes as under:

I'm Nobody ! Who are you?
 Are you — Nobody — Too?
 Then there's a pair of us?
 Don't tell ! they'll advertise — you know !

 How dreary — to be — Somebody !
 How public — like a Frog —
 To tell one's name — the livelong June —
 To an admiring Bog !

(Poem 288; p. 133).

Obviously, the poet wants to live in perfect anonymity, with no name and no identity. She does not want to be in the vortex of worldly affairs. She does not want name or frame. This is quite in keeping with her aloof living style. She used to withdraw herself into her father's room upstairs,

and to compose poetry there. It was a deliberate and conscious withdrawal. This withdrawal decides the content and form of her poetry; it settles its tone and temper.

As a recluse, Dickinson knows the shortlivedness of earthly life and the permanence of heavenly existence. She is quite firm in her convictions, and declares as follows:

I reason, Earth is short —
 And Anguish — absolute —
 And many hurt,
 But, what of that ?

I reason, we could die —
 The best Vitality
 Cannot excel Decay,
 But, what of that ?

I reason, that in Heaven —
 Somehow, it will be even —
 Some new Equation, given —
 But, what of that ?

(Poem 301; p. 142).

Accepting the temporal life of earth, the poet equates anguish and joy, vitality sustaining life and self negating death. Dickinson remains largely personal and private in her poetic corpus, and as such a study of the egotistical strain in it proves to be rich and rewarding.

(B) Love of Nature

Dickinson is widely acknowledged as a poet of Nature, who loves to depict her both facets— loveliness and fierceness. She frequently resorts to a minute description of Nature — birds and bees, flowers and leaves, butterflies and caterpillars, hills and mountains, the sun and the moon, the earth and planets, lightnings and volcanoes, and various other things. This is how she tries to define Nature and how she tries to define Nature and how she offers details about her :

“Nature” is what we see —

The Hill — the Afternoon —

Squirrel — Eclipse — the Bumble bee —

Nay — Nature is Heaven —

Nature is what we hear —

The Bobolink — the Sea —

Thunder — the Cricket —

Nay — Nature is Harmony —

(Poem 668; p. 332).

The poet is of the view that Nature is what we see and hear, and that she is synonymous with Heaven and Harmony. The hill, the afternoon, the squirrel, the eclipse, the bumble bee, the bobolink, the sea, the thunder, and the cricket are all various manifestations of Nature. Dickinson comes close to Romantic poets in observing the various phenomena of Nature so minutely. Dickinson went to Nature for her charms and beauty. Her approach to Nature is entirely her own and is supported by her own

individual, sometimes idiosyncratic, response. The following poem clarifies it amply :

To hear an oriole sing
May be a common thing,
Or only a divine.

It is not of the bird
Who sings the same, unheard,
As unto crowd.

The fashion of the ear
Attireth that it hear
In dun or fair.

So whether it be rune,
Or whether it be none,
Is of within;

The "tune is in the tree",
The sceptic showeth me;
"No, sir ! In thee !" ⁴

The song of oriole is made a matter of inner response of the reader, not merely an external phenomenon. Even Shelly, Keats and Wordsworth used to transfer their feelings to Nature in their poetry. Miss Emily also does the same in her poetry.

Sometimes Dickinson adopts a reverential attitude towards Nature. Conrad Aiken rightly remarks in this connection :

Her [Dickinson's] real reverence, the reverence that made her a mystic poet of the finest sort, was reserved for Nature, which seemed to her a more manifest and more beautiful evidence of Divine Will than creeds and churches.⁵

This reverential attitude of Dickinson is to be seen in the following poem wherein she calls Nature the gentlest mother. It is a bit long poem and it will be quoted in snatches only :

Nature, the gentlest mother,
 Impatient of no child,
 The feeblest or the waywardest, —
 Her admonition mild

In forest and the hill
 By traveller is heard,
 Restraining rampant squirrel
 Or too impetuous bird.

... ..

Her voice among the aisles
 incites the timid prayer
 Of the minutest cricket,
 The most unworthy flower.

When all the children sleep
 She turns as long away
 As will suffice to light her lamps;
 Then, bending from the sky,

... ..

Will there really be a morning?

Is there such a thing as day?

If I were as tall as they?

Has it feet like water-lilies?

Has it feathers like a bird?

Is it brought from famous countries

Of which I have never heard?

... ..

(Selected Poems, pp. 65-66)

This poem reminds us of Wordsworth's "Three Years She Grew", wherein Nature assumes the role of a caretaker mother to supervise the healthy growth of a three-year-old girl in her open lap. It may be just a matter of coincidence that Dickinson's poem adopts the same attitude towards Nature that does the poem of Wordsworth, but it also establishes the truth that these two poets were the kindred souls in this matter.

In many of her poems, Dickinson describes the morning, the spring, the sun and the moon, birds and bees, flowers and leaves, and other objects of Nature. This is what we find in the following stanzas :

The sun just touched the morning;

The morning, happy thing,

Supposed that he had come to dwell,

And life would be all spring.

She felt herself supreamer, —
 A raised, ethereal thing;
 Henceforth for her what holiday!
 Meanwhile, her wheeling king.

Trailed slow along the orchards
 His haughty, spanzled hems,
 Leaving a new necessity, —
 The want of diadems!

(Selected Poems, pp.67-68).

The poet shows a keen sense of observation here; the sun, the morning, the spring, the orchards, the hems and diadems are all found in this passage. Similarly, the following two stanzas bring out her deep love of Nature and her various objects :

And notwithstanding bee that worked,
 And flower that zealous blew,
 This audience of idleness
 Disdained them, from the sky,

 Till sundown crept, a steady tide,
 And men that made the hay,
 And afternoon, and butterfly,
 Extinguished in its sea,

(Selected Poems; p.69).

This quoted passage displays the poet's keen eye for bee and the flower, the sky and the sundown, a steady tide and the hay, the afternoon and the butterfly, and the sea. Dickinson is ever drawn towards the greenery of trees and grass, the freshness of flowers and leaves, the sweet chirping of birds and the golden yellowness of the butterfly. Thus, in one of her smaller poems, she writes :

Who robbed the woods,
The trusting woods?
The unsuspecting trees
Brought out their burrs and mosses
His fantasy to please.

(Selected Poems, p.76).

Very minutely the poet marks the soft flowers being affected by south winds, bumblebees and butterflies turn by turn. This is precisely what we find in the following lines :

South winds jostle them,
Bumblebees come,
Hover, hesitate,
Drink, and are gone.

Butterflies pause
On their passage Cashmere;
I, softly plucking,
Present them here!

(Selected Poems, pp. 88-89)

The poet finds a soothing companionship in Nature. She is in harmony with her. This is the mood reflected in the following poem :

The bee is not afraid of me,
 I know the butterfly;
 The pretty people in the woods
 Receive me cordially.
 The brooks laugh louder when I come,
 The breezes madder play.
 Wherefore, mine eyes, thy silver mists?
 Wherefore, O summer's day?

(Selected Poems; p.99)

The bee, the butterfly, the woods and its inhabitants, the brook, the breezes, and the summer day : all are cordial towards her. Presumably they share her feelings and ideas and commune with her. The poet's fancy runs riot in the face of natural charms, and she tries to capture them in glowing words. Mark the following in this regard :

The grass so little has to do, —
 A sphere of simple green,
 With only butterflies to brood,
 And bees to entertain,

 And stir all day to pretty tunes
 The breezes fetch along,
 And hold the sunshine in its lap
 And bow to everything

(Selected Poems, pp.100-101)

The poet's love of Nature is so overwhelming that she can't escape a beautiful scene and sight, which seems to be idyllic in its appeal. Like Wordsworth, she enjoys every moment to be in close touch with Nature. Here is a detailed account of an exceptionally alluring natural scene :

Some rainbow coming from the fair!
 Some vision of the World Cashmere
 I confidently see!
 Or else a peacock's purple train,
 Feather by feather, on the plain
 Fritters itself away!

The dreamy butterflies bestir,
 Lethargic pools resume the whirl
 Of last year's sundered tune.
 From some old fortress on the sun
 Baronial bees march, one by one,
 In murmuring platoon!

The robins stand as thick to-day
 As flakes of snow stood yesterday,
 On fence and roof and twig.
 The orchis binds her feather on
 For her old lover, Don the Sun,
 Revisiting the bog !

(Selected Poems, pp. 99-100)

Clearly, the poet's imagination has run riot here in detailing various objects of Nature — a rainbow, a vision of Cashmere (Which is usually called the Paradise on earth), a peacock's purple train, the dreamy butterflies, the lethargic pools, some old fortress on the sun, baronial bees marching in murmuring platoon, the robins and flakes of snow, the fence and roof and twig, the orchis in love with the Sun and revisiting the bog. What a variety of pageants! And how absorbed the poet is in them!

Dickinson displays her fondness not merely of lovely spectacles of Nature but also of her fierce and harsh aspects. At such times she alters her vocabulary and makes use of consonants and harsh and guttural sounds. This may be notably observed in the following three stanzas of four lines each:

An awful tempest mashed the air,
The clouds were gaunt and few;
A black, as of a spectre's cloak,
Hid heaven and earth from view.

The creatures chuckled on the roofs
And whistled in the air,
And shook their fists and gnashed their teeth,
And swing their frenzied hair.

The morning lit, the birds arose;
The monster's faded eyes
Turned slowly to his native coast,
And peace was Paradise!

(Selected Poems, pp.79-80)

The reader comes across here 'an awful tempest' mashing the air, 'the clouds' appearing 'gaunt and few', the 'black' looking like 'a spectre's cloak', 'the creatures' chuckling on the roofs and whistling in the air, shaking 'their fists' and gnashing 'their teeth' and swinging 'their frenzied hair'. They are all called 'monsters' in the second line of the third stanza. On the approach of the morning, the birds arise singing and the sun starts peeping, and then the monsters' 'faded eyes' disappear, restoring peace and tranquillity in the atmosphere.

The bird that is often described with softness and sympathy also becomes aggressive and violent at times. It can then assume the role of a killer of worms, as we may see in the following extract :

A bird came down the walk :
 He did not know I saw;
 He bit an angle-worm in halves
 And ate the fellow, raw.

And then he drank a dew
 From a convenient grass,
 And then hopped sidewise to the wall
 To let a beetle pass.

(Selected Poems, p.80)

Though the quoted stanzas present an ugly scene, in which the killing of an angle-worm by the bird, the poet does not mince words to depict it faithfully.

Even the wind is painted as rough and biting on a chilly day. When it starts blowing harsh, it produces an ominous scene around. This is what we find in the passage quoted below :

There came a wind like a buzle;
 It quivered through the grass,
 And a green chill upon the heat
 So ominous did pass
 We barred the windows and the doors
 As from an emerald ghost;
 The doom's electric moccasin
 That very instant passed.
 On a strange mob of panting trees,
 And fences fled away,

 And rivers where the houses ran
 The living looked that day
 The bell within the steeple wild
 The flying tidings whirled.

(Selected Poems, pp. 82-83).

The windy scene is a trouble one; it disturbs the green grass, the windows and the doors, the trees and fences, the rivers and the bells. It produces a scene similar to that of the appearance of a ghost, sending all things into disorder and chaos. The phrases like 'an emerald ghost' and 'the doom's electric moccasin' help to evoke this sort of impression.

Another remarkable feature of Dickinson's Nature poetry is her sensitiveness to colours and sounds. She often shows her propensity for yellow, gold, blue and scarlet colours. In painting these colours, her feminine sensibility is definitely at work, as women are generally attracted to ornaments and bright colours. This propensity of the poetess comes out vividly in the following poem :

Nature rarer uses yellow
 Than another hue;
 Saves she all of that for sunsets, —
 Prodigal of blue,

 Spending scarlet like a woman,
 Yellow she affords
 Only scantily and selectly,
 Like a lover's words.
 (Selected Poems, p.85).

The dim colours also do not escape her attention, and she is prompted to write as follows :

Frequently the woods are pink,
 Frequently are brown;
 Frequently the hills undress
 Behind my native town.
 (Selected Poems, p.87)

Evidently, the poet is portraying here a graphic picture of the woods and the hills and her native town. How marvellously she points the sunset scene in the western horizon ! —

Blazing in gold and quenching in purple,
 Leaping like leopards to the sky,
 Then at the feet of the old horizon
 Laying her spotted face, to die

(Selected Poems, p.91)

This is a description of how 'the juggler of the day is gone'. The sunset verily catches the poet's attention frequently. Again, she depicts its beauty and colours in an unmistakable way :

This is the land the sunset washes,
 These are the banks of the Yellow Sea;
 Where it rose, or whither it rushes,
 These are the western mystery!

(Selected Poems, p.104).

And after depicting the sunset in a memorable manner, the poet returns to the sunrise. No doubt, it is a colourful sunrise, and she writes as below :

I'll tell you how the sun rose, —
 A ribbon at a time.
 The steeples swam in amethyst,
 The news like squirrels ran.
 The hills untied their bonnets,
 The bobolinks begun.
 Then I said softly to myself,
 "That must have been the sun!"

(Selected Poems, pp. 108-109)

In the early hours of the morning when the sun rises in the east, it sends and its rays like ribbons. At that time, the steeples are coloured in amethyst, and the hills appear in their openness. In the presence of natural beauty, the poet writes in utter abandon. This may be gathered from the following poem:

The morns are meeker than they were,
The nuts are getting brown,
The berry's cheek is plumper,
The rose is out of town.

The maple wears a gayer scarf,
The field a scarlet gown,
Lest I should be old-fashioned,
I'll put a trinket on.

(Selected Poems, p. 112).

The poet describes so many natural objects in one breath — the morns, the nuts and their brown colour, the fleshy cheek of the berry, the rose, the maple, the field, and a trinket. So, we can say that her mind is moving very fast here, and she ropes in so many things in one place (in a small poem).

The moon also enraptures the poet, who describes her charms at some length. Seen from this angle, the following poem bears an added significance :

The moon was but a chin of gold
A night or two ago,
And now she turns her perfect face
Upon the world below.

Her forehead is of amplest blond;
 Her ch  ek like beryl stone;
 Her eye unto the summer dew
 The likest I have known.

 Her bonnet is the firmament,
 The universe her shoe,
 The stars the trinkets at her belt,
 Her dimities of blue.

(Selected Poems, pp. 122-123).

Certainly, the poet is at her happiest while painting a picture of the moon, the stars, the firmament, and different parts of the moon's body (her chin, her face, her forehead, her cheek, her eye, and her lips). Colours — gold, beryl (stone), amber, silver (will) — find a prominent place in it.

Sometimes sounds — songs and melody — also capture the poet's ear. The bee is particularly marked by her for its sweet humming. This is how the poet writes about it :

It's like the light, —
 A fashionless delight,
 It's like the bee, —
 A dateless melody.

(Selected Poems, p.121).

And again :

The bees will not despise the tune
 Their forefathers have hummed

(Ibid., p.114).

Once again the poet tells us that she is deeply attached to the murmur of a bee:

The murmur of a bee
A witchcraft yieldeth me.
If any ask me why,
'Twere easier to die
Than tell.

(Ibid., p.97).

Besides the bee, the song of an oxide also moves the poet, who regards it as exceptionally pleasing and inspiring. Thus, she writes :

To hear an oriole sing
May be a common thing,
Or only a divine.

(Selected Poems, p.72).

Dickinson hardly ever mentions the son of the nightingale or that of the skylark, as Wordsworth and Shelley do in their respective poetry.

Dickinson's Nature poems are largely impressionistic, recording as they do the poet's responses to the scenes and situations around. Conrad Aiken rightly remarks of them as follows :

Her Nature poems ... are not the most secretly revelatory or dramatically compulsive of her poems, nor on the whole, the best. They are often of extraordinary delicacy — nearly always give us, with deft brevity, the exact in terms of the quaint.⁶

Her Nature poems begin in delight and end in delight (not 'in wisdom', as it is with Robert Frost). That is why they often become superficial and surfacial, lacking in depth of thought. Further, they are not so elevating and sublimating as the poems of Wordsworth. Commenting on Dickinson's Nature poetry, George Frisbie Whicher rightly remarks :

Emily Dickinson, who fully shared the self-sufficiency of the Transcendentalists, was hardly touched by their mystical doctrine of nature. The beautiful pageant of the external world thrilled her senses, but not to the point of intruding upon her identity.⁷

From this remark it becomes clear that Miss Dickinson moved on the level of external natural charms, without exploring their inherent spiritual or mystical aspects.

(C) Theme of Love

Dickinson has composed a number of poems on the theme of love. May be, such poems are inspired by an intimate personal experience. Who in particular is the real source of inspiration for these poems cannot be said with an air of certainty. But conjectures are rife that some young men might have touched her heart. Of such men, mention may be made of Benjamin Newton, Henry Vaughan, Charles Wadsworth, and Abbie Root. In some of her letters she reveals her soft feelings towards them. But it is so far to assume that she offers an imaginative treatment to the theme of love. This argument is in accord with her self-imposed confinement and her fondness for solitude. Moreover, there is no element of earthliness in her love poetry, and in this matter she is utterly contrasted to many other poets, like Shakespeare, Donne, Burns, Shelley, Keats,

Sylvia Plath, and Kamala Das. She rather elevated love to the spiritual and mystical plane (a thing that is quite missing in her Nature poetry). Hence George Frisbie Whicher is correct and judicious when he makes the following remarks :

Emily Dickinson was the only American poet of her century who treated the great lyric theme of love with entire candour and sincerity. But it is not enough to say of her, as we may say of Catullus and Burns that she wrote love poems of extraordinary intensity.⁸

So, there is a touch of sincerity and frankness in Dickinson's love poems. And these love poems breathe with an air of intensity and passion. Hereafter we will examine her love poems where these qualities are amply found.

Dickinson expresses her whole-hearted love for her lover, and she does so because she knows that love is life, and that life is immortality. This is what we see in the following poem (quoted in full) :

That I did always love,
 I bring thee proof :
 That till I loved
 I did not love enough.

That I shall love away,
 I offer thee
 That love is life,
 And life hath immortality.

This, dost thou doubt, sweet?

Then have I

Nothing to show

But Calvary

(Selected Poems, p.134).

So intense is the love she has for him that she considers that it is not enough. In a love-affair, fears and doubts are bound to arise, and the poetess tries to convince the lover in her own way. The heart starts vibrating in moments of love, and the poetess vents this idea in the following stanza :

Have you got a brook in your little heart,

Where bashful flowers blow,

And blushing birds go down to drink,

And shadows tremble so ?

(Selected Poems, p.134).

Love creates ripples of emotion in the heart, and the beloved becomes 'bashful' when the arrows of love strike it. She gets blushed over the growth of love within her. Clearly, some incident of frustration had taken place in the poet's life, and she records it in a few poems :

Poor little heart !

Did they forget thee ?

Then dinna care ! Then dinna care !

Proud little heart !

Did they forsake thee ?

Be debonaire ! Be debonair !

Frail little heart !
 I would not break thee :
 Could'st credit me ? Could'st credit me ?
 (Selected Poems, p.154).

This poem undoubtedly reflects the poet's feeling of disappointment and estrangement in love — the sooner the better. So, she addresses her heart thus:

Heart, we will forget him !
 You and I, to-night !
 You may forget the warmth he gave,
 I will forget the light.
 When you have done, pray tell me,
 That I my thoughts may dim;
 Haste ! lest while you're lagging,
 I may remember him.

(Selected Poems, p.156).

Here is full regrets and misgivings. The poet also undergoes such an experience in her life. Hence she wants to forget all about it. As a stung creature, she cries aloud in pain as follows :

Not with a club the heart is broken,
 Nor with a stone;
 A whip, so small you could not see it,
 I've known

To lash the magic creature
 Till it fell,
 Yet that whip's name too noble
 Even to tell.

(Selected Poems, p.157).

Thus, Dickinson's love poetry is largely a poetry of complaint and protest. She could not fulfil herself in love. The magic of love receives a jolt, rather a severe shock, owing to the sudden departure — may be, death — of the lover. The heart becomes so heavy that it cannot sustain the loss of love (as seen above).

The unfulfilled nature of the poet's love finds an expression in some of his poems. This is what we infer from the following short poetic piece :

My friend must be a bird,
 Because it flies !
 Mortal my friend must be,
 Because it dies !
 Barbs has it, like a bee.
 Ah, curious friend,
 Though puzzlest me !

(Selected Poems, p.157)

Here in this quoted piece one comes across the tease and tension of an unrequited love. Three times the poet uses an intimate term like 'friend', indicating her nearness to her lover, but also the same friend flies away like

a bird and dies soon. This makes all the difference in her life; she is totally puzzled and tormented at his sudden departure. His loving memory, however, still lingers with her, and she writes as under :

He touched me, so I live to know
 That such a day, permitted so,
 I groped upon his breast,
 It was a boundless place to me,
 And silenced, as the awful sea
 Puts minor streams to rest.

(Selected Poems, p.158).

The poet was so close to her friend that he touched her, caressed her, and embraced her. She felt a lot of joy and freedom in his company. But with his departure or death, things have entirely changed for her — “And now, I’m different from before”. She has adopted a different air and attitude thereafter. She has changed her dress; even her feet and face has ‘transfigured’ since then. She has got reconciled to her fate and become somewhat composed and resigned.

Dickinson speaks of two gifts bestowed upon her by love — one, the legacy of love, and two, the intensity of pain. Thus, love and pain become interlaced in her case, and she says thus :

You left me, sweet, two legacies, —
 A legacy of love
 A Heavenly Father would content,
 Had He the offer of,

You left me boundaries of pain
 Capacious as the sea,
 Between eternity and time,
 Your consciousness and me.

(Selected Poems, p.131).

Here the poet hints at a different kind of love — divine love or love of Heavenly Father (God), who sustains the entire universe. This love is definitely different from the one we discover in the following lines :

Elysium is as far as to
 The very nearest room,
 If in that room a friend await
 Felicity or doom.

What fortitude the soul contains,
 That it can so endure
 The accent of a coming foot,
 The opening of a door !

(Selected Poems, p.132).

This quoted passage shows a deep personal touch in it. The presence of 'a friend' in a room makes it simply heavenly.

As hinted above, the divine love is seen in many poems of Dickinson. It is in them that the temporal is elevated into the spiritual and the mystical. According to Mohammad Mansoor Khan, "The projection of love into a temporal-spiritual realm seems to be engendered by a sensibility that has

suffered pain for so long that it turns its perception from the world of sense to a supersensuous realm of imaginative vision that is found in the Romantic Tradition of love from Shakespeare onwards in the 19th Century Romantic poetry".⁹ This tradition points to 'a famished sensibility' which is ever eluded by consummation. This precisely applies to Emily Dickinson's sensibility.

The sublimation of love is a recurrent feature of Dickinson's poetry. It is this quality that makes her a mystic poet. Hereafter we shall see some examples of divine love poetry. This is one such poem :

Doubt me, my dim companion !
 Why, God would be content
 With but a fraction of the love
 Poured thee without a stint.
 The whole of me, forever,
 What more the woman can, —
 Say quick, that I may dower thee
 With last delight I own !

(Selected Poems, p.132).

As a lover, she reposes full faith in God and His contentment with whatever little love she has to offer him. She is even prepared to offer 'the whole' of herself to Him. So, we see that the poet is habitual of raising the physical to the level of the eternal, the mortal to the level of the immortal. The idea of love is surely linked with the idea of immortality or eternity in Dickinson's verse. And this is what we find in the following stanza :

That I shall love alway,
 I offer thee
 That love is life,
 And life hath immortality.

(Selected Poems, p.134).

The poet Dickinson, thus, associates love with life, and life with immortality. Her love divine and deep sense of attachment to Heavenly Lover are beautifully articulated in the following :

And were you lost, I would be,
 Though my name
 Rang loudest
 On the heavenly fame.
 And were you saved,
 And I condemned to be
 Where you were not,
 That self were hell to me.

(Selected Poems, p.137).

She is prepared to enter hell in order to save her lover. For her, love is not only inspiring but holy and sacramental. Thus, she says :

My worthiness is all my doubt,
 His merit all my fear,
 Contrasting which, any qualities
 Do lowlier appear;

Lest I should insufficient prove
 for his beloved need,
 The chiefest apprehension
 Within my loving creed.

So I, the undivine abode
 Of his elect content,
 Conform my soul as 'twere a church
 Unto her sacrament.

(Selected Poems, pp.151-152).

She knows that her lover is all merit and no blemishes and that her own 'qualities' are of a lower grade and she herself being 'undivine'. Still, she wishes to make her body 'a church' and follow the path of goodness and charity. By all means, she wants to make herself holy and acceptable to him. As a self-sacrificing lover, she desires to offer her heart to him [the Divine lover]. She thus utters aloud :

Father, I bring thee not myself, —
 That were the little load
 I bring thee the imperial heart
 I had not strength to hold.

The heart I cherished in my own
 Till mine too heavy grew,
 Yet strangest, heavier since it went,
 Is it for large for you ?

(Selected Poems, p.156).

But she is fully aware of the truth that it is 'a solemn thing' to be a white woman pursuing a holy and hallowed course. At such moments of awareness too, she does not forget God and Eternity. She then writes as follows :

A solemn thing it was, I said,
 A woman white to be,
 And wear, if God should count me fit
 Her hallowed mystery.

A timid thing to drop a life
 Into the purple well,
 Too phimmetless that it come back
 Eternity until.

(Selected Poems, p.160).

If she claims to be holy, she is also humble and polite in her attitude to Him. She is not sure that she is quite 'fit' for His acceptance. So, she calls herself 'a timid thing'. Her simplicity, her humility, her holiness, her sincerity and her frankness are some of the enduring qualities of Dickinson as a poet of love, more so when she is composing poems of divine love.

Out of her knowledge of love, Dickinson tries to define it in this way:

Love is anterior to life,
 Posterior to death,
 Initial of creation, and
 The exponent of breath.

(Selected Poems, p.152).

In her view, love begins before life and continues after death; it is the source of all creation and the exponent of our breath.

One who holds such a high opinion of love, can't stand its degeneration, as it is a priceless thing that can't be bought or sold in the market. This is what she expresses powerfully in the following poem :

I gave myself to him,
 And took himself for pay.
 The solemn contract of a life
 Was ratified this way.

 The wealth might disappoint,
 Myself a poorer prove
 Than this great purchaser suspect,
 The daily own of Love.

 Depreciate the vision;
 But, till the merchant buy,
 Still fable, in the isles of spice,
 The subtle cargoes lie.

 At least, 'tis mutual risk, —
 Some found it mutual gain;
 Sweet debt of Life, — each night to owe,
 Insolvent, every noon.

(Selected Poems, p.144).

The tone and the vocabulary of the poem reflects the mercenary nature of his love, for which the poet is not prepared. After all, this nature of love

might satisfy a purchaser, but not the one who has cherished noble ideals about it. She is disappointed with it and her vision is belied. We can, therefore, maintain that the poet has a noble dream, an excellent vision, of love and she can't compromise it with lower love at any cost.

As a lover, Dickinson knows the subtle distinction between 'woman' and 'wife'. In one of her poems, she says thus:

I'm wife; I've finished that,
The other state;
I'm Czar, I'm woman now :
It's safer so.

How odd the girl's life looks
Behind this soft eclipse !
I think that earth seems so
To those in heaven now.

This being comfort, then
That other kind was pain;
But why compare ?
I'm wife ! stop there !

(Selected Poems, pp.140-141).

As we know, a girl grows to be a woman, and a woman becomes a wife on getting married. But till one is a girl, one faces an odd life. So, it is better — rather safer — to be a woman now turned into a wife. The status of a wife is happier and more comfortable. That's why she gladly accepts it. The blissful life of a woman and a wife is also suggested in the poem given below:

She rose to his requirement, dropped
 The playthings of her life
 To take the honourable work
 Of woman and of wife.

If aught she missed in her new day
 Of amplitude, or awe,
 Or first prospective, or the gold
 In using wore away,

It lay unmentioned, as the sea
 Develops pearl and weed,
 But only to himself is known
 The fathoms they abide.

(Selected Poems; p. 144).

Here the first stanza brings out the development of a girl into a woman. As a woman, she leaves behind 'the playthings of her life' and takes 'the honourable work' of a wife. And she tries to rise 'to his requirements' and satisfy him by all means. The second stanza informs us that as a wife, the woman enjoys herself, her days of amplitude and awe, her prospectives and her gold. But by and by, she wears away in doing the domestic duties and looking after the house and children. The third and last stanza tells us that an ordinary person cannot estimate her value and depth, because she is also an invaluable mother of her children. Of all the love poems, this is certainly the best, not so much because of its form as because of its thought. The poem raises the

position of a woman into a wife and mother. The woman is treated here not an object of pleasure, but as a perpetrator of the human race.

(D) Themes of Transcendentalism

Transcendentalism was at its height in New England when Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman were busy writing their works and creating an atmosphere of idealism, mysticism and metaphysical pursuits. Emily Dickinson was also born and bred in this region, and cultivated these qualities in her poetry to a large extent. Though she expressed her ignorance of Walt Whitman — in one of her letters date 25th April 1862 and addressed to T.W. Higginson she says, “You speak of Mr. Whitman — I never read his Book — but was told that he was disgraceful —.”¹⁰ she knew well about the other two gentlemen, i.e. Emerson and Thoreau and was influenced by them. Emerson was living only sixty miles away, and he was an infectious personality. His poems started pouring in when Miss Emily was barely seventeen. When she was only twenty four, Thoreau’s Walden appeared; and when she was twenty-five, Whitman’s Leaves of Grass. It may be said that Dickinson came to full ‘consciousness’ at a time when American literature came to full ‘flowering’ under the lead of the great Transcendentalists.

The noted scholar, George Fiske Whicher, in his critical biography on Emily Dickinson, formulates the theory that the young poetess had great respect for Emerson, the thinker and the speaker. Whicher remarks that “The Emerson that touched her [Emily Dickinson]

most nearly was the philosopher and the singer of the transcendental dawn, the Emerson of Nature, the Essays and the Poems.”¹¹ One may hear the echoes of Emerson’s ideas in Dickinson’s poems as easily as in Whitman’s. Emerson’s ideas of the Absolute Perfection of God and the Immortality of the Soul are clearly found in Dickinson’s poetry. The then current Emersonian doctrine of mystical individualism also finds an expression in her poetry. These ideas were very much in the atmosphere, and Whicher rightly points out that —

The resemblance that may be noted in Emerson, Parker, Thoreau, Emily Dickinson and several other New England authors were due to the fact that all were responsive to the spirit of the time. Their work was in various ways a fulfilment of the finer energies of a Puritanism that was discarding the husks of dogma. If we now think of Emerson as the centre and soul of the transcendental movement, it is not because he invented Transcendentalism, but because in his writings the new philosophy reached a consummate fruition and received its widest applications.¹²

Dickinson’s poetry displaying the Emersonian individualism, however, carries her own original stamp. Henry James once observed of Emerson as follows:

The doctrine of the supremacy of the individual to himself, of his originality and, as regards his own character, unique quality, must have had a great charm for people living in a society in which introspection, thanks to the want of other entertainment, played almost the part of social resource ...¹³

The 'doctrine of the supremacy of the individual to himself' is the doctrine which appeals to Dickinson most. She even carried the practice of this doctrine farther than Thoreau did it. In her poetry she carried it farther than Emerson. Her myriad moods and fancies are reflected in it, and this adds an individualistic touch to her poetry (yea, it makes her poetry truly personal and even egotistical). Like Emerson, whose essays and poems must have influenced her, she remained all her life "a singular mixture of Puritan and free thinker."¹⁴ Speaking of this fact, Conrad Aiken remarks thus:

The problems of good and evil, of life and death, obsessed her; the nature and destiny of the human soul; and Emerson's theory of compensation. Toward God.... "she exhibited an Emersonian self possession".¹⁵

Occasionally she became irreverent towards the Puritan conception of God. In one of her poems she refers to God as 'a noted clergyman', and in another she salutes Him as 'Burglar, banker, father'. Perhaps her perfect metaphysical detachment is most precisely stated in the famous mock-prayer in the poem "The Single Hound", in which she addresses God and impertinently apologises to Him for His own 'duplicity'.

Under the themes of Transcendentalism, we shall be studying the following one by one (to be clearly found in Dickinson's poetry):

- (I) Life, Death and Immortality.
- (II) Time and Eternity.
- (III) Truth and Beauty.

These themes are not placed here in any chronological order, but they will be examined hereafter in some detail in the order mentioned above.

(I) Life, Death and Immortality

Life and death are to be seen as complement to each other, and immortality is posterior to them. They are the subjects that attracted Emily Dickinson very often, and she wrote a number of poems on them. She regarded life as an ordinary event, but death was something special for her. Death was ever seen by her as dramatic situation that enabled the hankering soul to be united to God. Dickinson composed her poems on various aspects of life and death.

One of her popular poems is on 'success' in human life. The poetess thinks that success and failure are the two sides of the same coin. One who is victorious today may get defeated tomorrow. This idea is marvellously echoed in the three stanzas of the poem:

Success is counted sweetest
 By those who ne'er succeed.
 To comprehend a nectar
 Requires sorest need.

Not one of all the purple host
 Who took the flag today
 Can tell the definition
 So clear of Victory,

As he, defeated, dying,
 On whose forbidden ear

The distant strains of triumph
Break, agonized and clear.

(Selected Poems, p. 3).

The poet comes out with her own views of success. She opines that it tastes 'sweetest' to those who have never attained it in life. She maintains that the victor cannot clearly define 'victory'; at most he can only experience it. Like the celebrated British poet, Robert Browning, she believes that the attainment of success is not the real aim of life; one should rather go on striving to reach it. The victor knows it well that the moments of his joy are brief and transient. He is always in the grip of fear of losing it. The defeated person is rather in a better position, since he knows that the worst has already happened to him. Moreover, he is the happiest person who is ever prepared for death. No fear will be able to assail his mind and heart thereafter.

In tune with this idea, Dickinson feels much joy and elation even when she fails in a venture. There is no poverty, no depletion, in such an event. Thus, she writes:

'Tis so much joy ! 'Tis so much joy !
If I should fail, what poverty !
And yet, as poor as I
Have ventured all upon a throw;
Have gained ! Yes ! Hesitated so
This side the victory !
Life is but life, and death but death !

Bliss is but bliss, and breath but breath !
 And if, indeed, I fail,
 At least to know the worst is sweet.
 Defeat means nothing but defeat,
 No drearier can prevail !

(Selected Poems, p.4)

For one thing, failure is a gain for her; it is 'this side the victory' (or, the other side of victory). The second stanza clearly brings out Emily's concepts of life and death, of bliss and breath. It also states very emphatically that failure enables one to enjoy the sweetness of 'the worst'. Moreover, the poetess welcomes death because nothing more dreadful can happen after this.

The poetess does not want to hurt anyone or to break anyone's heart. She wants to alleviate the other's pain and suffering. At any cost, she wants to be of help to others. This idea finds an outlet in the following poem:

If I can stop one heart from breaking
 I shall not live in vain;
 If I can ease one life the aching,
 Or cool one pain,
 Or help one fainting robin
 Unto his nest again,
 I shall not live in vain.

(Selected Poems, p.5)

Naturally, a person of charitable nature is speaking in it. The poet's generous nature comes out vividly herein.

Dickinson acknowledges the value of calmness and tranquillity of life. In one of her smaller poems, she says thus :

Our lives are Swiss, —
 So still, so cool,
 Till, some odd afternoon,
 The Alps neglect their curtains,
 And we look farther on.

(Selected Poems, p.59)

Here is a portraiture of both life and death, — the latter is sensed in looking farther on, beyond the Alps. In the same way, the poet directly mentions life and death in the following short poetic piece :

Life, and Death, and Giants
 Such as these, are still.
 Minor apparatus, hopper of the will,
 Beetle at the candle,
 Or a life's small fame,
 Maintain by accident
 That they proclaim.

(Selected Poems, p.59)

Clearly, the poet upholds the view that Life and Death (also 'Giants') are maintained on earth by mere 'accident'. Anything can happen to a being at any moment. Perhaps the self same view is also vented by T.S. Eliot when he states in his famous poem "The Portrait of a Lady" : "I have measured out my life with coffee spoons".¹⁶

In human life, faith occupies an eminent place, and it is more valuable than an estate. This idea is also expressed in the poem quoted below :

To lose one's faith surpasses
 The loss of an estate,
 Because estates can be
 Replenished, — faith cannot.

Inherited with life,
 Belief but once can be ;
 Annihilate a single clause,
 And Being's beggary.

(Selected Poems, p.58)

Life without belief is just like a beggar. An estate can be replenished, but a faith once lost cannot be. No doubt, faith is the anchor for human life; without it life is impoverished.

Another idea of Dickinson about human life is that it swings between mirth and anguish, joy and pain, sunshine and sorrow. This idea is articulated by her in a number of poems. For example, —

The heart asks pleasure first,
 And then, excuse from pain;
 And then, those little anodynes
 That deaden suffering;

 And then, to go to sleep;
 And then, if it should be

The will of its Inquisitor,
The liberty to die.

(Selected Poems, p.6)

It is extract, the poet mentions pleasure and pain, the deadening of suffering and the liberty to die, all in one hurried death. It is a fact of life that it cannot be all pleasure, and that it cannot be all pain; it is rather a curious mixture of the two. And this fact is remarkably conveyed by the poet here. This fact is also articulated by her in the following poem consisting of three stanzas of four lines each :

A wounded deer leaps highest,
I've heard the hunter tell;
'Tis but the ecstasy of death,
And then the brake is still..

The smitten rock that quashes,
The trampled steel that springs :
A cheek is always redder
Just where the hectic stings !

Mirth is the mail of anguish,
In which it caution arin,
Lest anybody spy the blood
And "You're hurt" exclaim !

(Selected Poems, p.6)

The highest leaping of the wounded deer is related to 'the ecstasy of death'. Mirth is accompanied with anguish. The poet seems to be in love with death.

The continuity of pain is beautifully depicted by Dickinson in a small poem given below :

Pain has an element of blank;
 It cannot recollect
 When it began, or if there were
 A day when it was not.

 It has no future but itself,
 Its infinite realms contain
 Its past, enlightened to perceive
 New periods of pain.

(Selected Poems, pp.12-13)

Pain has a present, a past, and a future of its own. The dark side of life — like death, destruction, and the predominance of pain — held a special attraction for the poet. If we read a poem like the following one, it becomes quite clear :

I can wade grief,
 Whole pools of it, —
 I'm used to that.
 But the least push of joy
 Breaks up my feet,
 And I tip — drunken.
 Let no pebble smile,
 'Twas the new liquor, —
 That was all !

Power is only pain,
 Stranded, through discipline,
 Till weights will hang.
 Give balm to giants,
 And they'll wilt, like men.
 Give Himmaleh, —
 They'll carry him !

(Selected Poems, p.20)

Here once again the poet puts grief and joy side by side. He uses the metaphor of 'liquor' for each one of them. Power or the hunt for power is usually associated with pain. Also, the poet believes that grief or joy has its own ecstasy, and human life hovers between these ecstasies. How splendidly this idea is expressed in the following extract :

For each ecstatic instant
 We must an anguish pay
 In keen and quivering ratio
 To the ecstasy.

For each beloved hour
 Sharp pittances of years,
 Bitter contested farthings
 And coffers heaped with tears.

(Selected Poems, p.21)

Very clearly, joy and grief are equipped here, as they are in actual life. Keeping this fact in mind, the poet observes that 'coffers [are] heaped with

tears'. Even the martyrs are said to have trodden through 'the straight pass of suffering', keeping their feet upon temptation and their faces upon God. Delight and suffering, in Dickinson's poetry, go hand in hand. This is what we find in the following short poem :

Delight becomes pictorial
When viewed through pain, —
More fair, because impossible
That any gain.

The mountain at a given distance
In amber lies;
Approached, the amber elits a little, —
And that's the skies !

(Selected Poems, p.25)

The poet thinks that delight becomes pictorial when it is seen through pain, just as victory becomes more alluring and inspiring when it comes after defeat. The latter idea also finds a place in Emily's poetry, as it may be seen below :

Defeat whets victory, they say;
The reefs in old Gethsemane
Endear the shore beyond.

(Selected Poems, p.28)

A victory that comes late cools the spirit of the victor, as he is now not ready to receive it. The poet expresses it in the following lines :

Victory comes late,
 And is held low to freezing lips
 Too rapt with frost
 To take it.

(Selected Poems, pp. 28-29)

There is a fit time for everything to happen, and if it does not happen at that time, much of the charm disappears.

Miss Emily might have led the life of a recluse at home, but poems reveal her commonsense and wisdom at times. And whatever she writes she writes it with her own experiences at the centre. In this matter, the following poem may be quoted with full justice:

Each life converges to some centre
 Expressed or still;
 Exists in every human nature
 A goal.
 Admitted scarcely to itself, it may be,
 Too fair
 For credibility's temerity
 To dare.
 Adored with caution, as a brittle heaven,
 To reach
 Were hopeless as the rainbow's raiment
 To touch,

... ..

Ungained, it may be, by life's low venture,
 But then,
 Eternity enables the endeavoring
 Again.

(Selected Poems, pp. 32-33).

Every human being fixes a goal to reach in life, but sometimes that goal is not easily attainable. Though the seeker of that goal may not be so hopeful, there is no harm in striving toward it — 'To strive, to seek, to find', as Lord Tennyson puts it. The poet Dickinson believes that even if a man fails to reach his goal, the 'endeavoring' itself is laudable. She, like Robert Browning, thinks that 'failure is a stepping-stone to success'. This is what Browning says in his well known poem, "Rabbi Ben Ezra":

Then, welcome each rebuff
 That turns earth's smoothness rough,
 Each sting that bids nor sit nor stand but go !
 Be our joys three-parts pain !
 Strive, and hold cheap the strain;
 Learn, nor account the pang, dare, never grudge the throe !¹⁷

Miss Emily never cherished ambitious in her life, yet she knew that having a noble goal or ideal is ever preferable to having no goal or ideal in one's march forward.

Hopes and fears are inseparable companions. The poet knows it from her own experiences. She therefore writes as follows:

When I hoped I feared,
 Since I hoped I dared;
 Everywhere alone
 As a church remain;
 Spectre cannot harm,
 Serpent cannot charm,
 He deposes doom
 Who hath suffered him.

(Selected Poems, p.35).

One who has 'suffered' long need not worry about any other dangers — neither spectre, nor serpent, nor doom itself.

In another poem, Dickinson calls hope 'a subtle glutton' who 'feeds upon the fair'. Here she says:

Hope is a subtle glutton;
 He feeds upon the fair;
 And yet, inspected closely,
 What abstinence is there !

(Selected Poems, pp. 45-46).

Hope, however, has to be tampered with abstinence or self-control, otherwise it will breed merely fear and dejection.

Elsewhere, the poetess passes her remarks about the possession of wealth. Her acute observation of life is reflected in the following :

Are friends delight or pain ?

Could bounty but remain

Riches were good.

But if they only stay

Bolder to fly away,

Riches are sad.

(Selected Poems, p. 55).

As noticed above, Emily Dickinson has composed quite a few poems on death. She seems to be preoccupied with the thought of death, and this thought is contrasted to the thought of immortality (which also gets a fair deal at her hand). Commenting on this aspect of her poetry — i.e., the treatment of death — Conrad Aiken rightly observes:

Death, the problem of life after death, obsessed her. She seems to have thought of it constantly — she died all her life, she probed death daily.... Ultimately, the obsession become morbid, and her eagerness for details, after the death of a friend — the hungry desire to know how she died — became almost vulture-like.¹⁸

But this is apparently the one side of her life-story; the other side — i.e., her involvement in life with its myriad facets — of it is also equally true.

Dickinson views death from every possible angle, and leaves a record of her thoughts and emotions about it in her poems. If course, death is a terror to be feared and shunned. It is a hideous mistake; a trick played on trusting humanity by a sportive yet cruel deity. It is a welcome relief

from mortal ills. Also, it is a blessed means to eternal happiness.¹⁹ Speaking of Miss Emily's poems on the theme of death, the well-known critic Thomas H. Johnson remarks:

The poems on death fall into three groups. There are those which are concerned with the physical demise of the body, some describing the act of dying with clinical detachment, some with emotional vehemence. Others muse upon death or depict the face and form of the body on which the gazer's attention is riveted. There are the poems in which death, the suitor, is personified — in which the theme deals less with life here and now, or of life to come, than with the precise moment of transition from one state to the other.²⁰

Also, Emily wrote a few elegies and epitaphs on her friends and personages whom she admired (like Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Charlotte Brontë).

There is a persistent thought in her poems of death that binds them together, and that is "the knowledge that death snaps the lines of communication with those we have known and loved."²¹ This knowledge creates an air of uncertainty in the minds of all whether that communication can ever be restored. This idea is articulated in the following poem:

Those who have been in the Grave the longest —
Those who begin Today —
Equally perish from our Practise —
Death is the further away —
Foot of the Bold did least attempt it —

It — is the White Exploit —
 Once to achieve, annuls the power
 Once to communicate —

(Complete Poems, pp. 433-434).

So, the power if death is to snap communications with the near and dear ones, and this fact troubled the poet most (as may be sensed in the quoted lines).

Dickinson was quite familiar with the works of Thomas Browne, especially his Hydrotaphia or Urn Burial, where she had witnessed the parade of death and the glimpses of immortality. She came to believe that death is a new kind of life and life as usually lived on earth a kind of death. But her sense of life and death does not become blurred in her poetry, and she consciously writes thus :

Life is but Life ! And Death, but Death !
 Bliss is, but Bliss, and Breath but Breath !
 And if indeed I fail,
 At least, to know the worst, is sweet !

(Selected Poems, p. 4).

Obviously, life is linked with breath and death with bliss. To attain bliss, one has to be free from all worries and fears, including those of death. One who is free from the fear of the Arch Enemy (as Browning calls Death) is the happiest man on earth.

Death is as much a reality as Birth. It comes at its appointed hour; no power on earth can stop it. Death is a great fear to Dickinson, as it is clear from the following poem :

While I was fearing it, it came,
 But came with less of fear,
 Because that fearing it so long
 Had almost made it dear.
 There is a fitting a dismay,
 A fitting a despair.
 'Tis harder knowing it is due
 Than knowing it is here.
 The trying on the utmost,
 The morning it is new,
 Is terribler than wearing it
 A whole existence through.

(Selected Poems, p. 49).

In slow degrees, Dickinson has come to terms with death, and hence it has become 'dear' to her. Thus, the horror of death is mitigated to some extent. Perhaps death is tolerable when it is vested with 'a stately air' and when one learns how to enjoy 'the simple days' without any worries or fears. This idea is conveyed by Dickinson in the following poem :

To venerate the simple days
 Which lead the seasons by,
 Needs but to remember
 That from you or me
 They may take the trifle
 Termed mortality.

To invest existence with a stately air,
 Needs but to remember
 That acorn there
 Is the egg of forests
 For the upper air !

(Selected Poems, p. 47).

The term 'mortality' is directly mentioned in the last line of the first stanza. The poet is well acquainted with the inevitable fate of human beings which is death. This idea is expressed in the four lines given below :

It's such a little thing to weep,
 So short a thing to sigh;
 And yet by trades the size of these
 We men and women die !

(Selected Poems, p. 47)

Death is usually associated with weeping and sighing. And the fate of man is death.

Dickinson's capacity for lyricism and simplicity comes out vividly in her poems of death. There is a poem called "Parting" which runs effortlessly like a following stream :

My life closed twice before its close;
 It yet remains to see
 If Immortality unveil
 A third event to me,

So huge, so hopeless to conceive,
 As these that twice befell.
 Parting is all we know of heaven,
 And all we need of hell.

(Selected Poems, p. 48).

The poem informs us that the poetess had fallen seriously ill and that the final death is yet to come. She equates death with immortality (which she expects to gain in due course). She is quite aware of the fact that 'parting' from this world takes one to 'heaven' or 'hell' (as the case may be).

Another poem of death full of unmatched lyricism and granite simplicity is the following one dealing with beauty and truth :

I died for beauty, but was scarce
 Adjusted in the tomb,
 When one who died for truth was lain
 In an adjoining room.
 He questioned softly why I failed ?
 'For beauty', I replied.
 'And I for truth, — the two are one;
 We brethren are', he said.
 And so, as kinsmen met at night,
 We talked between the rooms,
 Until the moss had reached our lips,
 And covered up our names.

(Complete Poems, p.).

Death is a great leveller. It levels up one who died for beauty and another who died for truth. These two become 'brothren' in the tombs until the moss covers up their lips and removes their names from there.

Thus, we see that death was as obsessive a theme with Dickinson as life with its myriad moods was. Rightly does Conrad Aiken remarks about her treatment of the theme of death in her poetry :

The theme was inexhaustible for her. If her poetry seldom became "lyrical", seldom departed from the colorless sobriety of its bare iambics and toneless assonance, it did so most of all when the subject was death. Death profoundly and cruelly invited her. It was most of all when she tried "to touch the smile, and dipped her fingers in the frost", that she took full possession of her genius.²¹

That Dickinson wrote a number of poems on life and death goes without gainsaying. That she had grown, at long last a lover of death is also equally true. Here is a poem to substantiate the latter statement :

Wait till the Majesty of Death
Invests so mean a brow !
Almost a powdered Footman
Might dare to touch it now !

Wait till in Evertasting Robes
That Democrat is dressed,
Then prate about "Preferment" —
And "Station", and the rest !

(Complete Poems, p. 81).

This love of the poet for death is clearly reflected in the objectives she uses for death — majestic, everlasting, and democratic. Death is all the more dear to her because it opens the gate of Immortality. Till a human being is in the physical frame, death and Immortality are distant things for him or her. But once he or she is liberated from the physical bondage, the door of Immortality possibly (yes, possibly) opens up.

Now, from ‘life’ and ‘death’ we pass on to the theme ‘immortality’ as found in Emily’s poetry. Though she does not write so many poems on this theme as she wrote on life and death, the subject is quite pertinent to us vis-a-vis Emily’s verse. The theme of Immortality enables the poetess to formulate “a philosophic testament as profound as it is daring”.²² By 1862, she had become mature enough to work out a vision of ‘the Colossal substance of Immortality’ :

The Soul’s Superior instants
Occur to Her — alone —
When friend — and Earth’s occasion
Have infinite withdrawn —

Or she — Herself — ascended
To too remote a Height
For lower Recognition
Than Her Omnipotent —

This Mortal Abolition
Is seldom — but as fair
As Apparition — subject

To Autocratic Air —
 Eternity's disclosure
 To favorites — a few —
 Of the Colossal substance
 Of Immortality

(Complete Poems, p. 144).

Dickinson looked upon the mystery of the unknowable with all alertness. She once wrote to Higginson a letter, saying 'You mention Immortality. That is the Flood subject'. She made her discoveries about the human heart, about the human soul and its immortality, through her own travail and bitter self-appraisal.

Dickinson imbibed the two shaping forces in her poetry — one is the Puritan tradition in which she was born, and the other is the romantic and transcendental doctrine. These two intellectual and spiritual forces, as we may call them, were there in the New England atmosphere of her time. The transcendental doctrine emphasized the view that sense experiences are fundamental in reality, and asserted the primacy of spiritual over material values. Like Puritanism, it was largely ethical, but differed from the older orthodoxy by repudiating traditional authority and by upholding the uniqueness of man's inner nature. It was never a religion, but a way of thinking akin to Unitarianism in that it "rejected a belief in an arbitrary God and asserted the perfectibility of all".²³ To the transcendentalist, revelation is substituted by intuition, and man himself becomes the source of moral law. By its very nature, transcendentalism as a doctrine meant so many things, depending on the individual exponent of it. According to Thomas

H. Johnson, "Its disregard of external authority and logical demonstration, its belief that the self-reliant individual may better his nature through his own effort, its optimism — all are basic in the thought of William Ellery Channing the younger, Emerson, Thoreau, and George Ripley".²⁴ No doubt, it was an idealistic philosophy.

Dickinson's roots lay deep in her Puritan past, though she sometimes believed that she despised them. Whatever she said, the influences of her home and family could not be denied. Her religious traditions led her to believe that man is a dependent creature whose intuitions are untrustworthy, that he is not perfectible in this life, that he is not the source of moral law, and that revelation is to be sought but it cannot be guaranteed.²⁵ Dickinson stuck to these things even in moments of severe doubt. They provide her poetry with "a durable consistency",²⁶ and she vociferously expresses them in her own individualistic manner. This is how she expresses her belief in the existence of God :

I know that He exists
 Somewhere, in silence.
 He has hid his rare life
 From our gross eyes.

 'Tis in instant's play,
 'Tis a fond ambush,
 Just to make bliss
 Earn her own surprise !

 But should the play

Prove piercing earnest,
 Should the glee flaze
 In death's stiff stare,
 Would not the fun
 Look too expensive ?
 Would not the jest
 Have crawled too far ?

(Selected Poems, p. 43).

Though this poem brings out the poet's firm belief in the existence of God, she occasionally rebels against Him if He is found malevolent and revengeful. For example, she is never reconciled to the God of punishment, and this is what she offers us in the following :

Far from Love the Heavenly Father
 Leads the Chosen Child,
 Oftener through Realm of Briar
 Than the Meadow mild.
 Oftener by the Claw of Dragon
 Than the Hand of Friend
 Guides the Little One predestined
 To the Native Land.

(Complete Poems, p. 470).

A strong note of protest against the divine chastisement runs in this poem.

In one of her poems, Dickinson thinks that 'remorse' is an instrument of punishment sent down for man. This is what we find in the following :

Remorse is memory awake,
 Her companies astir, —
 A presence of departed acts
 At window and at door.

Its past set down before the soul,
 And lighted with a match,
 Perusal to facilitate
 Of its condensed despatch.

Remorse is cureless, — the disease
 Not even God can heal;
 For 'tis His institution, —
 The complement of hell.

(Selected Poems, p.86).

Clearly, remorse is an implement in the hands of God and is used by Him against the individual man. It is 'cureless'.

The sermons she had heard as a girl at Amherst frequently expounded a jealous God than a compassionate Saviour, and she became increasingly impatient with the doctrine of Original Sin. Usually Dickinson associated this doctrine with the hypocrisy and timid conventions of 'brittle' people, who simply gave lip service to fair ideals but had little love in their hearts. It is about them that she writes :

What soft — Cherubic Creatures —
 These Gentlewomen are —

One would as soon assault a Plush —
Or violate a Star —

Such Divinity Convictions —
A Horror so refined
Of freckled Human Nature —
Of Deity — ashamed —

(Complete Poems, p. 191).

The 'gentlewomen' portrayed here are outwardly cherubic but internally hypocritical and pretentious. Their attitude towards religion and God is a shameful one. The poet Dickinson had a distaste for such pretentious people. Being the daughter of a priest, she had regards for noble men and women, simple souls, and innocent people. She maintained an intimate connection with two ordained ministers called Higginson and Wadsworth for a pretty long time (about 25 years). The first-named was her teacher of amicable nature. Her correspondence with him is known to the literary world, and it never touched upon spiritual matters. The nature of her correspondence is not known but one imagines that she had depended upon him for pastoral guidance. So, we can say that Dickinson avoided a contact with the worldly people, and that she mostly admired and depended upon the holy and virtuous ones.

If the poetess was noble-natured and unworldly, she tried her best to know about the 'self' and its relationship with God. She wrote many of her poems on this relationship. She called the 'self' in terms of the 'undiscovered continent' and the 'indestructible estate'. The solitude of space, of the sea, even of death, are often contrasted to the 'polar privacy — a soul

admitted to itself'. The soul selects its own society, its own realm to operate, and this society or realm is quite different from the one in which common men and women live. In this connection, we may quote the following lines :

The Soul selects her own Society —
 Then — shuts the Door —
 To her divine Majority —
 Present no more —
 Unmoved — she notes the Chariots — pausing —
 At her low Gate —
 Unmoved — an Emperor be kneeling
 Upon her Mat —

(Complete Poems, p.143).

The soul does not want any communion with the powerful ('the Chariots' and 'an Emperor' testify this fact) or with the materialistic people. Earlier, it has been noted that —

The Soul's Superior instants
 Occur to Her — alone —
 When friend — and Earth's occasion
 Have infinite withdrawn —

(Complete Poems, p.144).

So, the human soul needs loneliness or solitude to have a vibrating contact with God, and this is possible only when the 'earth' (or the people and their associations) has completely withdrawn from it. Mystics and spiritualists can

vouch it to be true. Once the soul is free from the body, nothing can trouble one, nothing can bind one. This is what we find in the following poem :

No Rack can torture me —
 My Soul — at Liberty —
 Behind this mortal Bone
 There knits a bolder One —

 You cannot prick with saw —
 Nor pierce with Scimitar —
 Two Bodies — therefore be —
 Bind one — The Other fly —

 The Eagle of his Nest
 No easier divest —
 And gain the Sky
 Than mayest Thou —

 Except Thyself may be
 Thine Enemy —
 Captivity is Consciousness —
 So's Liberty.

(Complete Poems, p.183).

The soul is a mighty thing, — in fact, mightier than a saw or a scimitar. If one wants to bind it, one becomes one's own enemy. In the quoted poem, the human 'consciousness' is pitted against the soul's 'liberty' and hence 'consciousness' is called 'captivity'. Naturally, a love of the 'soul' (or the 'self') isolates one from his surroundings, but it takes him to the Almighty.

There are several poems by Dickinson on the relationship between the soul and the heaven. And this relationship is that of the quester and the quested, or that of the host and the guest. This relationship is to be seen in the poem that declares : 'The Soul that hath a Guest/Doth seldom go abroad'. The soul-heaven relationship is clearly brought out in the following poem :

Take Your Heaven further on —
 This — to Heaven divine Has gone —
 Had you earlier blundered in
 Possibly, even You had seen
 An Eternity — put on —
 Now -- to ring a Door beyond
 Is the utmost of Your Hand —
 To the Skies

(Complete Poems, p.185).

Heaven lies, clearly enough, beyond oneself; so, one has to turn to it for one's betterment.

Very often Dickinson speaks eloquently about God and Jesus. This is how she writes in one of her poems :

God permits industrious Angels —
 Afternoons — to play —
 I met one — forgot my Schoolmates —
 All — for Him — straightway —
 God calls home — the Angels — promptly —
 At the Setting Sun —

I missed mine — how dreary — Marbles —
After playing Crown !

(Complete Poems, p.106).

The poetess wants to live in the company of God and His loved angels. This company is sweeter than that of her schoolmates. Her attitude towards God is that of love and hate. This attitude is fully revealed in the following lines:

Did we disobey Him ?
Just one time !
Charged us to forget Him —
But we couldn't learn !

Were Himself — such a Dunce —
What would we — do ?
Love the dull lad — best —
Oh, wouldn't you ?

(Complete Poems, p.122).

She calls Him 'a Dunce' because He wants us to remember Him without a break. In one of her poems, she calls Him a babbler, a burglar and uses strong words against Him. Towards Jesus she adopts a softer and a soberer stance. Mark the following poem in this regard :

The Savior must have been
A docile Gentleman —
To some so far so cold a Day
For little Fellowmen —

The Road to Bethlehem
 Since He and I were Boys
 Was leveled, but for that would be
 A rugged billion Miles —

(Complete Poems, p.)

This is a clear indication of divine mediation, but the emphasis is on human association. The poet's soft feeling towards Jesus is quite evident in the above quoted extract.

The problems of immortality are intimately connected with the theme of eternity (which shall be dealt with separately under the caption "Time and Eternity") and the theme of the love of God. Dickinson had no confusions about them, and she wrote poems on these themes mostly in the four years 1862-1865. These were the years of her creative fullness. Eternity, as the poet conceived it, is now and here and everywhere; it is an endless existence. She regards 'eternity' as a sweet companion and a 'friend'. Take the following poem as an instance of it :

The Blunder is in estimate.
 Eternity is there
 We say as of a Station.
 Meanwhile he is so near
 He joins me in my Ramble —
 Divides abode with me —
 No Friend have I that so persists
 As this Eternity.²⁸

Eternity is both in time and out of time. It shares abode with the poetess; it is her close 'friend'. She is able to establish her identity through eternity. It is this identity which enables her to contact the rest of humanity.

Similarly, Dickinson's love of God is clearly reflected in her poems. Combinedly, the theme of eternity and her love of God allude to the presence of the kingdom of heaven within herself. She looks upon the Father and the Son as her 'bridegrooms', to whom she is given in marriage

Given in marriage unto thee,
Oh, thou celestial host !
Bride of the Father and the Son,
Bride of the Holy Ghost !

Other betrothal shall dissolve,
Wedlock of will decay;
Only the keeper of this seal
Conquer mortality.

(Selected Poems, pp.207-208)

This idea is identical to Sufism, which also looks upon God as the bridegroom and the individual self as the bride. And this relationship is established on the moral and spiritual plane, not on the physical plane whatsoever. The poet reposes her full trust in the Lord. She, thus, writes as under :

Bless God, he went as soldiers,
His musket on his breast;
Grant, God, he charge the bravest
Of all the martial blest.

Please God, might I behold him

In epauletted white,

I should not fear the foe then,

I should not fear the fight.

(Selected Poems, p.213).

Her trust in God makes her bold, courageous and fearless. Taking refuge in Him prepared her for the worst fight.

There are some poems of Dickinson which directly deal with the theme of immortality. She at times puts time and immortality side by side as a contrast. Mark the two stanzas given below :

Some work for Immortality —

The Chiefer part, for Time —

He — Compensates — immediately —

The former — Checks — on Fame —

Slow Gold — but Everlasting —

The Billion of Today —

Contrasted with the Currency

Of Immortality —

(Complete Poems, p.193).

Evidently, immortality is contrasted to money and the mine, and one is a beggar without it. In another poem, Miss Emily identifies love with life and life with immortality. A person does not cease to exist with the dissolution of the body; he lives on till he has love to support him or her.

And this love is not necessarily physical; it is divine and spiritual. She writes as follows:

That I did always love
 I bring thee Proof
 That till I loved
 I never lived — Enough —

That I shall love always —
 I argue thee
 That love is life —
 And life hath Immortality —

This — dost thou doubt — Sweet —
 Then have I
 Nothing to show
 But Calvary —

(Complete Poems, p.267).

The poetess, in fact, does not allow any doubt or misgiving about her belief in love, life and immortality. She may only pity a doubter. In another poem, the poetess states that immortality is 'anterior to life' and 'posterior to death'. She even thinks that death is quite civil and courteous to her, and that it moves out in a carriage seating immortality in it. This is what we gather from the following two stanzas :

Because I could not stop for Death —
 He kindly stopped for me —

The Carriage held but just Ourselves —
And Immortality.

We slowly drove — He knew no haste
And I had put away
My labor and my leisure too,
For His Civility —

(Complete Poems, p.350).

Towards attaining immortality one has to ennoble oneself, to make one's soul independent and sovereign in its pursuit. Thus, the soul plays a dominant role in attaining the state of immortality :

The Soul unto itself
Is an imperial friend —
Or the most agonizing Spy —
An Enemy — could send —

Secure against its own —
No treason it can fear —
Itself — its Sovereign — of itself
The Soul should stand in Awe —

(Complete Poems, p.338).

The soul is a man's imperial friend if he attends to its call, but it becomes his enemy and spy if he becomes indifferent to it. The development of the soul upward and the sustenance of love are the two means of attaining the much-desired immortality.

(II) Time and Eternity

The poet Dickinson, who often explores the innermost cell of consciousness in search of reality, ponders over such abstract matters as time and eternity and their interrelationship. In this matter, she turns inward and explores her intuition (which is the same as Bergson's 'duree').

Dickinson considers 'time' as stupendous in significance as life itself. She believes that a change is unthinkable without time. So, conscious life exists in time, and she identifies conscious life with the 'Dial life'. This idea is found in the following extract :

A clock stopped —
 Not the Mantel's —
 Geneva's farthest skill
 Can't put the puppet bowing —
 That just now dangled still —
 An awe came on the Trinket !
 The figures hunched, with pain —
 Then quivered out of Decimals —
 Into Degreeless Noon —
 and again :
 Nods from the Gilded pointers —
 Nods from the Second slim —
 Decades of Arrogance between
 The Dial life —
 And Him —

(Complete Poems, pp.132-133).

The 'clock' denotes mathematical time. Dickinson lends it "an overtone of fatality and inevitability of pain".² The movement of the clock is suspended, and hence the noon becomes 'degreeless', so much so that it is somewhat irreparable by its 'doctors' (i.e., mechanics). The suspension of its movement is the suspension of conscious life in time. In another poem, the suspension of breath is identified with the suspension of the 'gilded hands' of the clock. Here she writes thus :

I think the longest Hour of all
 Is when the Cars have come —
 And we are waiting for the Coach —
 It seems as though the Time
 Indignant — that the Joy was come —
 Did block the Gilded Hands —
 And would not let the Seconds by —
 But slowest instant — ends —
 The Pendulum begins to count —
 Like little Scholars — loud —
 The steps grow thicker — in the Hall —
 The Heart begins to crowd —

(Complete Poems, p.314).

The imagery evoked in the third stanza is simply marvellous, and the pendulum is aptly compared to 'little scholars'. Even the heart feels the pinch of it. Dickinson's conception of time finds a remarkable expression in the following poem :

Forever — is composed of Nows —
 'Tis not a different time —
 Except for Infiniteness —
 And Latitude of Home —
 From this — experienced Here —
 Remove the Dates — to These —
 Let Months dissolve in further Months —
 And Years — exhale in Years —
 Without Debate — or Pause —
 Or Celebrated Days —
 No different Our Years would be
 From Anno Domini's —

(Complete Poems, pp.307-308).

So, the poet links eternity with 'nows' and the present movements. Obviously, 'now and here' is an inseparable component of 'infiniteness' or 'eternity'. But that is not the total 'eternity'. The various fragmentations of time — hours, dates, months and years — are consumed by the all-devouring Eternity. That she associates 'time' with 'Anno Domini' speaks of her Puritan heritage. There is yet another poem which records the conception of time as consciousness. This is how this poem partly runs :

'Twould start them —
 We — could tremble —
 But since we got a Bomb —
 And held it in our Bosom —
 Nay — Hold it — it is calm —

Therefore — we do life's labour —
 Though life's Reward — be done —
 With scrupulous exactness —
 To hold our Senses — on —

(Complete Poems, p. 213).

Time is treated here as a setter of order in human life. Then only a man can perform his routine properly. The moment he becomes aware of the gap between perfection and imperfection, the ticking of this conscious clock-time stops altogether. It is then the human soul becomes active towards sublimation. Dickinson compares the liberation of soul from pain and torture to the dance of a 'Bomb'. The soul's consciousness of time is not that of clock-time but of an essentially heightened and sublimated pure duration. According to a scholar, "Early Dickinson creates a correspondence between consciousness and clock-time. They are informed with an underlying current of movement and change. They can be dislocated only in the moments of enlarged awareness of the soul, *i.e.*, in the intuition of pure duration, or in moments of suspension of consciousness".³⁰

It would not be proper to say that Emily Dickinson overlooks the difference between time and space. In one of her poems (No. 1159), she presents an eternity of space. The poem in question is quoted below :

Great Streets of silence led away
 To Neighbourhoods of Pause —
 Here was no Notice — no Dissent
 No Universe — no Laws —

By Clocks, 'Twas Morning, and for Night
 The Bells and Distance called —
 But Epoch had no basis here
 For Period exhaled.

(Complete Poems, p.517).

Here we get a spatial vision of eternity (which remains beyond all barriers and bondages). No Law works here, and no epoch or period exists here.

Dickinson maintains that time is movement or change, and that the movement of time cannot be grasped by intellect alone unaided by intuition. She uses the metaphor of the hummingbird's flight to indicate the change and movement implicit in time. How far she relies on 'intuition' is to be grasped from the following poem :

By intuition, Mightiest Things
 Assert themselves — and not by terms —
 "I'm Midnight" — need the Midnight say —
 "I'm Sunrise" — Need the Majesty ?
 Omnipotence — had not a Tongue —
 His lisp — is Lightning — and the Sun —
 His Conversation — with the Sea —
 "How shall you know" ?
 Consult your Eye !

(Complete Poems, Stanzas II & III, p.201)

The quoted poem takes us to the heart of time — which is 'pure duration or mobility'. Commenting on this matter, M.M. Khan writes as under :

The intellect is competent to analyze durational time, first, as multiplicity of conscious states or moments each of which can be divided into infinity of instants; and secondly, as a unity that holds them together like a thread holding the pearls of a necklace. Our intuition, on the other hand, lands us unhesitatingly and directly into the flux of duration which moves into two opposite directions, downwards or upward.³¹

One of the best poems by Dickinson in which get a clear idea of the function and range of 'intuition' is "Because I could not stop for Death". The relevant portions of this poem are given below :

Because I could not stop for Death —
 He kindly stopped for me —
 The Carriage held but just Ourselves —
 And Immortality.

We slowly drove — He knew no haste
 And I had put away
 My labour and my leisure too,
 For His Civility —

We passed the School, where Children strove
 At recess — in the Ring —
 We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain —
 We passed the Setting Sun —

We passed before a House that seemed
 A Swelling of the Ground —

The Roof was scarcely visible —
 The Cornice — in the Ground —
 Since then — 'tis Centuries — and yet
 Feels shorter than the Day
 I first surmised the Horses' Heads
 Were toward Eternity —

(Complete Poems, p.350).

The poem is a very good example of the time-immortality-eternity theme. The first stanza brings in life, death, and immortality. Further, it makes the reader ready for the journey through time (which is described majestically in the second, third and fourth stanzas of the poem). The poet-narrator "is endowed with two levels of consciousness, the consciousness of involvement in the process of death described metaphorically; and simultaneously, the consciousness of detachment from it."³²

It is on the latter level that the poet-narrator is alive and joins life, time and eternity in a single moment. The last stanza must be marked for its intuition (or perception) of eternity as pure duration. The intuition of eternity enables one to feel centuries of spatialized time like a single day. With the third line of the last stanza, the consciousness of time returns.

In poem No.1684, Dickinson describes eternity as a living experience. This poem is quoted below in full :

The Blunder is in estimate.
 Eternity is there
 We say, as of a Station —

Meanwhile he is so near
 He joins me in my Ramble —
 Divides abode with me —
 No Friend have I that so persists
 As this Eternity.

(Complete Poems, pp.687-688).

The ever-presentness of Eternity is wonderfully depicted here. Also, it is so near that the poetess can feel its presence; it is a living entity and shares abode with her. In fact, Eternity is the closest friend for her.

Elsewhere, Dickinson puts Truth and God in the same class. Truth is a Co-Eternity with God. This idea is beautifully expressed in the following poem:

Truth — is as old as God —
 His Twin identity
 And will endure as long as He
 A Co-Eternity —

 And perish on the Day
 Himself is borne away
 From Mansion of the Universe
 A lifeless Deity.

(Complete Poems, p.404).

But the poetess becomes a little mischievous in the second stanza. She remarks here that Truth will perish along with God from this Universe.

She calls God 'a lifeless Deity', which is not Christian-like. But this is not for the first time that she has called Him so. In another poem, she designates Him as 'burglar, banker'.

There is a poem (No. 453) where Eternity is equated with love. The poet's attitude towards either of them is mysterious and mystical. The poet's attitude towards them may be sensed in the poem itself :

Love — thou art high —
 I cannot climb thee —
 But, were it Two —
 Who knows but we —
 Taking turns — at the Chimborazo —
 Ducal — at last — stand up by thee —

Love — thou art deep —
 I cannot cross thee —
 But, were there Two
 Instead of One —
 Rower, and Yacht — some sovereign Summer —
 Who knows — but we'd reach the Sun ?

Love — thou art Veiled —
 A few — behold thee —
 Smile — and alter — and prattle — and die —
 Bliss — were on Oddity — without thee —
 Nicknamed by God —
 Eternity —

(Complete Poems, pp. 217-218).

Here Love is pointed as seated high, and the poetess does not hope to reach there. It is so deep that she cannot cross, though sometimes the impossible becomes possible. Then, she regards Love as 'veiled' and hidden from many. One can't think of Bliss without Love, and in the final analysis Bliss is bracketed with Eternity.

Emily Dickinson has written some poems where she traced the relationship between the individual soul and eternity. On the decay of the body, the soul enters eternity. This idea is contained in the following poem:

Departed to the judgment,
 A might afternoon;
 Great clouds like ushers learning,
 Creation looking on.

 The flesh surrendered, cancelled,
 The bodiless begun;
 Two worlds, like audience, disperse
 And leave the soul alone.

(Selected Poems, p. 164).

A day comes when one dies, and then the soul goes to the abode of God for judgement. Emily — 'the bodiless' — begins when the body ceases to exist. The final journey is performed by the soul all alone. One should not grieve over this departure. The poet rather takes it as a matter of exultation. How beautiful this idea is articulated in the following poem:

Exultation is the going
 Of an inland soul to sea, —
 Past the houses, past the headlands,
 Into deep eternity !

Bred as we, among the mountains,
 Can the sailor understand
 The divine intoxication
 Of the first league out from land ?

(Selected Poems, p. 166).

The 'inland soul' is the individual soul in human body. On getting liberated from the physical bondage, it moves out towards eternity. The 'sea' is frequently used by Dickinson as a symbol of eternity, and this symbol appears here.

One of the frequently used thoughts of the poet is that of death, its attendant tranquillity, and the eventual vision of the dead with eternity. This thought is employed by the poet in the following short piece:

The bustle in house
 The morning after death
 Is solemnest of industries
 Enacted upon earth, —
 The sweeping up the heart,
 And putting love away
 We shall not want to use again
 Until eternity.

(Selected Poems, p. 173).

The poet presents a pen-portrait of the conditions of a dying man, who knows a crowd to himself. After his death, the whole atmosphere changes at home; everything looks sober and solemn. Of course, death gives a great jerk to the human heart and puts a brake to one's love, which can be revived only in eternity. The self-same thought is expressed in a longer poem given below:

To know just how he suffered would be dear;
 To know if any human eyes were near
 To whom he could intrust his wavering gaze,
 Until it settled firm on Paradise.

What was his furthest mind, of home, or God,
 Or what the distant say
 At news that he ceased human nature
 On such a day ?

And wishes, had he any?
 Just his sigh, accented,
 Had been legible to me.

And was he confident until
 Ill fluttered out in everlasting well?

Was he afraid, or tranquil?

Might he know
 How conscious consciousness could grow,
 Till love that was, and love too blest to be,
 Meet — and the junction be Eternity?

(Selected Poems, pp. 170-171).

To a dying man, suffering is inevitable. His suffering continues until his dying moments when he fixes his gaze upon Paradise and God. The poet then speculates about the whispers of the people about the dead man or woman. She could not read his wishes at the time of death, but she could certainly hear his sighs'. She is not able to read the face of the dying man — was he afraid or peaceful? And finally, his consciousness meets love at the place of Eternity. For one thing, once when the dying person has passed through the doors of darkness, he meets light and love at the hands of Eternity. Nowhere does the poet mention the fright or ferociousness associated with Eternity. That's why the reader comes across Miss Emily's softness for Eternity (as expressed in many of her poems).

Poets and thinkers have always used the metaphor of 'sleep' for death. Even Robert Frost uses this metaphor insistently in the last stanza of "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening":

Woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But, I have promises to keep,
Miles to go before I sleep,
Miles to go before I sleep.

(Underlined word mine).

Emily Dickinson also uses the same metaphor of 'sleep' for death, and she looks upon death as a stepping-stone to immortality and eternity. Mark the following poem in this context :

Sleep is supposed to be,
By souls of sanity,

The shutting of the eye.
 Sleep is the station grand
 Down which on either hand
 The hosts of witness stand !
 Morn is supposed to be,
 By people of degree,
 The breaking of the day.
 Morning has not occurred !
 That shall aurora be
 East of eternity;
 One with the banner gay,
 One in the red array, —
 That is the break of day.

(Selected Poems, pp.180-181)

‘Sleep’ is associated here with ‘the shutting of the eye’, and it is often attended by near and dear ones. Contrasted to this, ‘morning’ is associated with ‘the breaking of the day’, and it is stationed in the ‘East of eternity’, which is signalled by ‘the banner gay’ and ‘the red array’. Thus, eternity is linked with brightness, red colour, and gay banner.

The ‘dial life’ on earth is full of trouble and suffering. But the chronometric time offers no ‘remedy’ to it; it merely accentuates it in degree. This is what we see in the following :

They say that “time assuages”, —
 Time never did assuage;

An actual suffering strengthens,
 As sinews do, with age.

Time is a test of trouble,
 But not a remedy.

If such it prove, it prove too
 There was no malady.

(Selected Poems, p.206).

So, to overcome trouble and suffering, one has to free oneself from the tentacles of time. For this, one has to take steps and move forward towards Eternity, which is the still-point for all time. Dickinson makes use of this idea in the poem quoted below in full :

Our journey had advances;
 Our feet were almost come
 To that odd fork in Being's road,
 Eternity by term.

Our pace took sudden awe,
 Our feet reluctant led.
 Before were cities, but between,
 The forest of the dead.

Retreat was out of hope, —
 Behind, a sealed route,
 Eternity's white flag before,
 and God at every gate.

(Selected Poems, pp.193-194).

Having reached Eternity, no one can retrace one's steps. At the above of Eternity, and at others as the cessation of 'mortality' (or death). For the first proposition, we can quote the following poem :

We thirst at first, — 'tis Nature's act;
 And later, when we die,
 A little water supplicate
 Of fingers going by.
 It intimates the finer want,
 Whose adequate supply
 Is that great water in the west
 Termed immortality.

(Selected Poems, pp.226-227).

After Nature's act of birth and death in the life of a person, what one craves for is 'immortality'. For the second one, we are tempted to cite the following poem :

Given in marriage unto thee,
 Oh, thou celestial host !
 Bride of the Father and the Son,
 Bride of the Holy Ghost !
 Other betrothal shall dissolve,
 Wedlock of will decay;
 Only the keeper of this seal
 Conquers mortality.

(Selected Poems, pp.207-208).

This poem shows the poet's unflinching faith in God, Christ and the Holy Spirit. Any other course of action, such as marriage, will woefully dissolve and bring about 'mortality'. Again and again, the poet reverts to the theme of death and immortality (we have already discussed this point), and the following short poem of barely four lines will illustrate it :

That such have died enables us

The tranquiliser to die;

That such have lived, certificate

For immortality.

(Selected Poem, p.208)

Here the other's death is linked to one's own death in a peaceful manner, whereas the others' living is joined to 'immortality'. What we have seen above is the truth that death is the cessation of life, and that life leads to immortality. In Emily's vocabulary, we do not discover any essential difference between immortality and eternity.

We would like to conclude this discussion by pointing out that there is a remarkable poem on the subject of eternity, packed with lyrical intensity and economical expression. And this poem is :

On this wondrous sea,

Sailing silently,

Knowest thou the shore

Ho ! pilot, ho !

Where no breakers roar,

Where the storm is o'er ?

In the silent west
 Many sails at rest,
 Their anchors fast;
 Thither I pilot thee, —
 Land, ho ! Eternity !
 Ashore at last !

(Selected Poems, pp.230-231).

Crossing the 'wondrous sea' of life, one reaches the shore of Eternity, where 'no breakers roar' and where no 'storm' blows. Supposedly, this shore lies across the silent western sea. Only a visionary and mystical poet of the stature of Emily Dickinson could have made such a statement because it brings out her deep realisations in life.

(III) Truth and Beauty

Miss Emily has occasionally dealt with truth and beauty in her poetry. She responds to truth and beauty in her own typical manner, and then her theory of aesthetics becomes known to us. In this matter, she is just like Keats, the celebrated Romantic poet. The bee and the butterfly, the flowers and the leaves, the robins and the skylarks, the sun and the moon, the river and the hill, the farm and the field, the colours and the sounds : all capture her attention inescapably and compel her to write some charming poems. Thus, in one of her poems, she says :

Flowers — Well — if anybody
 Can the ecstasy define —
 Half a transport — half a trouble —

With which flowers humble men :
 Anybody find the fountain
 From which floods so contra flow —
 I will give him all the Daisies
 Which upon the hillside blow.

Too much pathos in their faces
 For a simple breast like mine —
 Butterflies from St. Domingo
 Cruising round the purple line —
 Have a system of aesthetics —
 Far superior to mine.

(Complete Poems, p.64).

The poet is irresistibly drawn towards flowers, the fountain, floods daisies, hillside, and butterflies. The last-named — butterflies — force her to believe that the aesthetics of Nature is far better than that of her own. At times the poet can describe a number of natural objects for their distinctive charms, such as in the following :

An altered look about the hills —
 A Tyrian light the village fills —
 A wider sunrise in the morn —
 A deeper twilight on the lawn —
 A print of a vermilion foot —
 A purple finger on the slope —
 A flippant fly upon the pane —

A spider at his trade again —
 An added strut in Chanticleer —
 A flower expected everywhere —
 An axe shrill singing in the woods —
 Fern odours on untravelled roads

(Complete Poems, pp.65-66).

While treating the different objects of Nature, the poet grows eloquent like Wordsworth. Her technique of cataloguing details reminds us of Whitman. In fact, many more examples of this kind of lyrical and romantic poetry may easily be quoted from the writings of Dickinson. Such examples unquestionably show her love of Nature and her attraction towards the objects of beauty. But she finds it difficult to define beauty', and in her helplessness she says :

The Definition of Beauty is
 That Definition is none —
 Of Heaven, easing analysis,
 Since Heaven and He are one.

(Complete Poems, p.460).

As beauty is something abstract, it is pretty difficult to give a definition of it. But in her own humble way, she points out that beauty is divine and heavenly. What actually pains the poet is the transitoriness of beauty, and this is to be seen in case of a lily or a butterfly. Otherwise, she always longs for beauty and is even prepared to die for it. After all, a thing of beauty is a joy forever' (Keats).

Miss Emily is also attracted toward Truth and she tries to seek it through her poetry. In one of her poems, she writes as under :

Truth — is as old as God —
 His Twin identity
 And will endure as long as He
 A Co-Eternity —
 And perish on the Day
 Himself is borne away
 From Mansion of the University
 A lifeless Deity.

(Complete Poems, p.404).

So, truth is co-existent with God; it will live till He lives in the universe. Truth is highly prized because it protects a person from falsehood and wickedness and ennobles and sublimates his nature.

Combinedly, truth and beauty form the foundation of Dickinson's poetic art. They are the roots of her aesthetics, and in this respect she resembles the great English poet, John Keats. Like Dickinson, Keats clearly declared in his famous poem "Ode on a Grecian Urn" thus :

Beauty is truth, truth beauty; — that is all
 Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.³³

Dickinson understands the importance of these two elements — beauty and truth — and accords a proper place to them in her poetic practice.

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CHAPTER - IV

A STUDY IN THE ROMANTIC SENSIBILITIES

As stated in earlier chapters, Emily Dickinson was a poet of 'romantic sensibility', though she was not in the tradition of historical Romanticism. The romantic sensibility is marked by a sense of awe and grandeur, a profuseness of imagination, a note of subjectivity or personal touch, a strong streak of individualism, a love of common man and Nature, etc. As for Dickinson, the sense of awe and grandeur arose in her from a close observation of life and nature around her. Dickinson observed men, women and children as well as New England nature with open eyes and alert mind. According to Walter Blair et al, "The common, for her, included a household group of men, women, and children; New England nature in the small range of nearby fields, and the rooms of a house as they were known to a housekeeper. She saw these with eyes focused to minute details ..."¹. Thus, the world of Miss Emily was her surroundings at Amherst.

In her approach to nature and surroundings, Emily Dickinson was a romantic. And her approach inspired a good deal of awe towards the grandeur of Nature. She considered Nature to be a manifest and beautiful evidence of Divine Will. She was more drawn to Nature more than to creeds and churches. Hereafter we shall take into account some of her emotional responses to Nature and her beauties.

(a) Dickinson's Sense of Awe and Grandeur

Dickinson's explicit attitude towards the objects of Nature and their charms was one of awe and grandeur. She loved Nature and her charms

with “a burning simplicity and passion”.² Her Nature poems — the result of her minute observation and faithful depiction — are not “the most secretly revelatory or dramatically compulsive”.³ They are often “of extraordinary delicacy” and always “give us, with deft brevity, the exact in terms of the quaint”.⁴ In truth, her sense of the quaint and the strange, her perception of the weird and the bizarre, is unmistakable in her poetry.

Certain examples may be given here to indicate Emily’s sense of awe and grandeur. One such example is the poem numbered 812, which runs partly thus :

A Light exist in Spring
Not present on the Year
At any other period —
When March is scarcely here.

A Color stands abroad
On Solitary Fields
That Science cannot overtake
But Human Nature feels.

It waits upon the Lawn,
It shows the furthest Tree
Upon the furthest Slope you know
It almost speaks to you.⁵

In the above-quoted passages, the poet wants her feelings of awe and grandeur at an unusual light of the Spring season which colours the solitary fields, the bush-green lawn, the furthest tree and slope. The entire poem is a marvellous description of natural beauty, and the poet is absolutely filled

with awe and wonder at the uncommon grandeur light, reminding us of Wordsworth's 'the light that never was on earth or sea'. Her sense of awe and grandeur is whetted by the unusual splendour of light in Spring.

Another poem, numbered 122, also beautifully brings out the poet's sense of awe and grandeur. It tells us of 'a summer's Day' that makes her ecstatic and awe-struck. Mark the following stanzas (the first three) in this connection :

A something in summer's Day
As slow her flambeaux burn away
Which solemnizes me.

A something in a summer's noon —
A depth — an Azure — a perfume —
Transcending ecstasy.

And still within a summer's night
A something so transporting bright
I clap my hands to see — ⁶

The poet is simply bewildered at the charms of a summer's day — also its noon and night — which downs with its solemnity (line 3), advances with its depth perfume, colour and ecstasy, and ends up with a transporting brightness. Though it is purely descriptive poem, it wonderfully highlights the poet's sense of awe and grandeur in the face of a summer's day.

(b) Pain and Grief

Another noticeable feature of Emily Dickinson's poetry is that it abounds in pain and grief. As we know, she was a perfect recluse, cut off from the social transactions and interactions with fellow-beings. Such a person

is quite fit for embracing pain and grief in her life. She rather gloated over it and gave vent to it in many of her poems. Miss Emily was fully aware of the fact that love, ecstasy and bliss are just one side of the coin, while pain, anguish and suffering are the other side of it. Whether her feeling of pain and grief is caused by frustration in love or psychoneurosis is a matter of conjecture, but it is so pervasive in her poetry that one comes to believe that she and suffering had become 'strong bed-fellows'. In due course, she learnt how to sublimate her pain and suffering into a spiritual triumph.

Dickinson expresses pain and anguish of all kinds in her poetry. She is confident that pain leads ultimately to 'heaven' :

It was the old road through pain —
That unfrequented one —
With many a turn — and thorn —
That stops at heaven.
(Poem 344; p.163).

Pain leading to heaven prepares for 'peace of mind, all passion spent.' It releases the mind from all tensions — mental, emotional and physical.

The poem "After great pain, a formal feeling comes" focuses acutely on the paralysed and prostrate sensibility and its puppet-like automatic movement. This is how it begins :

After great pain, a formal feeling comes —
The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs —
The stiff Heart questions was it He, that bore,
And Yesterday, or Centuries before ?

(Poem 341; p.162).

This is situation of benumbness, and in such a situation the nerves and the heart do not function properly.

Dickinson sometimes juxtaposes pain (or agony) and ecstasy. Thus, in one of her poems, she writes :

For each ecstatic instant
We must an anguish pay
In keen and quivering ratio
To the ecstasy.
(Poem 125; p.58).

The poet knows how to balance pain and pleasure, sorrow and delight. And this a sane view of life.

Some of Dickinson's poems accept pain as a legacy of God. Man is destined to suffer between the polarities of time — this time and time hereafter. The poem numbered 644 expresses this idea nicely :

You left me — Sire — two legacies —
A Legacy of Love
A Heavenly Father would suffice
Had he the offer of —

You left me Boundaries of Pain —
Capacious as the Sea —
Between Eternity and Time —
Your Consciousness — and Me —

(pp. 319-320).

Here the poetess speaks of the two divine legacies — the legacy of love and the legacy of pain, and they are clearly placed against each other. The unrequited or frustrated love lands in misery and sorrow.

The infinite nature of pain and suffering is brought out vividly in poem 650. Thus, it becomes an integral part of eternity. Like eternity, it has no beginning and no ending. The poet writes thus :

Pain — has an Element of Blank —
 It cannot recollect
 When it begun — or if there were
 A time when it was not —

 It has no Future — but itself —
 Its Infinite contain
 Its Past — enlightened to perceive
 New Periods — of Pain.
 (pp. 323-324).

This is a very compact and condensed poem, beginning and ending with the same thought. 'Pain' is made so pervasive here, and its infiniteness contains all times — present, past and future. The poet is able to impart a mystical touch to pain; its ways become inscrutable in this manner.

In another poem — No.772 — the poet once again links pain and grief with 'heaven'. This idea has already been discussed by us. It is sufficient to point out here that pain is the portion of those who reach the top, and that it is a precious and hallowed experience. This is how the poem goes about :

The hallowing of Pain
 Like hallowing of Heaven,
 Obtains at a corporeal cost —
 The Summit is not given

(p.377)

This is one of the poems where the consecration of pain takes places (to this point we shall revert in section (d) of this Chapter.

Miss Emily also dwells on the effect of pain in her poetry. The memory of pain first introduces “chilling sensation of numbness, then stupefaction, and lastly, complete loss of consciousness.”⁷ According to a critic, pain is thus transformed into “a purely psychical experience like paranoia.”⁸ This critic — Mohammad Mansoor Khan — upholds the view that, in describing the effect of pain, Dickinson “fires psychical realism with fantastic imagination.”⁹ Dickinson’s imagination is as much fired in the treatment of pain and death as in the depiction of love and ecstasy.

(C) Ecstasy in Dickinson’s Poetry

Ecstasy in Dickinson’s poetry assumes the shape of emotional delight at its extreme, but it is never free from pain and anguish. As soon as the poet-persona reaches near fulfilment or achievement, it eludes her, and the resulting torture is ‘ecstasy’. As stated earlier, Dickinson always balances pleasure and pain, delight and anguish. John Donne, a great Metaphysical poet like Dickinson herself, also writes about ‘ecstasy’, but his treatment of ‘ecstasy’ clearly equates it with divine bliss, unworldly rapture. While Dickinson has nothing to fight with Donne on the question

of 'ecstasy', she renders it more tortures and more eluding. Ecstasy is discovered in Dickinson in her themes of love, life, nature, death, and immortality. For one thing, in Metaphysical poetry, love and death go hand in hand. This is found in both Donne and Dickinson. Even the style of the two poets is startling shocking and unconventional. What is being suggested here is the truth that these two poets are 'the kindred souls'. For both, concentration and intensity form the core of poetry. In the opinion of Theocore Spencer, "Had she [Dickinson] lived in the seventeenth century, her position would have been, I imagine, somewhere between Herbert and Donne".¹⁰ But for her Puritan upbringing (which brings her close to Herbert), she is more akin to Donne. In this context, Spencer further comments : "Her [Dickinson's] poems are hard, sharply defined, packed with meaning".¹¹ This is exactly what we find in Donne's poetry too.

As regards 'ecstasy' in Dickinson's poetry, it is used in its several synonyms, to express "an emotional state which fuses pleasure and pain and awards a perception of that tantalizing moment in the pursuit of pleasure when fulfilment eludes just on the moment of its achievement."¹² The resulting torture generates ecstasy. This idea is articulated in the following lines :

For each ecstatic instant
We must an anguish pay
In keen and quivering ratio
To the ecstasy.

For each beloved hour
Sharp pittances of years —

Bitter contested farthings —

And Coffers heaped with Tears.

(Poem 125; p.58).

Here ecstasy is mingled with anguish, Coffers with Tears. This pleasure-pain antithesis is very much “a rusming strategy in her [Dickinson’s] poetry.”¹³ Take the following poetic passage as an illustration of this kind of antithesis :

Delight — becomes pictorial —

When viewed through Pain —

More fair — because impossible

That any gain —

(Poem 572, p.278).

Thus, delight or ecstasy becomes ‘pictorial’ when it is viewed through pain. It is never without the tinge of pain.

A scholar, Mohammad Mansoor Khan, aptly suggests that Dickinson’s poetry brings out several shades of meaning for the term ‘ecstasy’. According to him, the following are the shades of meaning of ‘ecstasy’ :

1. (I) Ecstasy of delight as a referent of feeling: “I find ecstasy in living — the mere sense of living is joy enough” (Wetters, 11, 342a, 474;

- (II) As referring to nature : “Flowers-well- if anybody can the ecstasy define — ” (Bem 137; also 640, 1641).

- 2) Ecstasy of Tantalus, suspense, or despair arising from anticipation, e.g., "Better will be the Ecstasy / That they have done expecting me —" (J-207); "If you were coming in the Fall / I'd brush the Summer by" (J-511) suggests the ecstasy of Tantalus.
- 3) Ecstasy of pain or dying : "A Wounded Deer — leaps highest .../ 'Tis but the Ecstasy of death —" (J-165); or "In keen and quivering ratio / To the ecstasy" (J-125, st. I; also J-71).
- 4) Ecstasy of inspiration : as, "The treason of an accent / might Ecstasy transfer —"; "Write me how many notes there be / In the Robinson's ecstasy" (J-128).
- 5) Ecstasy as an urge for evolution : "Your secret, perched in ecstasy / Defies imprisonment !" (J-129); "The Mold — life — all forgotten — now / In Ecstasy — and Dell —" (J-392).¹³

These various implications of 'ecstasy' confirm the fact that Dickinson is immensely seized of the wide range of its application. She treats of the theme of ecstasy in, at least, three modes of emotional experience : the ecstasy of pain or death, the ecstasy of pain or death; the ecstasy of Tantalus; the ecstasy of the grotesque.¹⁴

(d) Consecration of Pain and Ecstasy

Dickinson does not think of pain and ecstasy at the mere physical level; she rather exalts them to the level of divinity and immortality. More than any of her contemporaries she knew how to discriminate between vision and fact, and was fully aware of the

shortlivedness of the moment of 'ecstasy' in human life.¹⁵ This is how she writes in one of her poems :

The Heart asks Pleasure — first —
And then — Excuse from Pain —
And then — those little Anodynes
That deaden sufferings —
(Poem 536; p. 262).

Dickinson usually mingles pleasure with pain, delight with sorrow. She has made a permanent company with pain and agony. In one poem, she says: "I like a look of Agony,/ Because I know it's true" (Poem 241; p.110). In another she writes : "Power is only Pain — / Stranded, thro' Discipline ..." (Poem 252; p.115).

If pain is a portion of life, it is also associated with love. It is said that Dickinson had felt a disappointment in love. Who was her lover is a mystery. Because of her disappointment, she underwent moments of pain and agony. In poem 549, she says :

That I did always love
I bring thee Proof
That till I loved
I never lived — Enough —
That I shall love always —
I agree thee
That love is life —
And life hath Immortality —
(p. 267).

Thus, love that gives excruciating agony makes human life full and liveable. 'Love is life', as the poet remarks. Both are interlinked and inseparable. And a life of love grants immortality to man. In this way, pain arising from love eventually leads to immortality, and becomes elevated and consecrated.

Similarly, Dickinson's acceptance of 'ecstasy' is not at the physical level; it rather moves at a higher level. While discussing 'ecstasy' earlier, we have pointed out that 'ecstasy' does not simply mean 'delight' and that it is coloured with despair and sorrow. We also then hinted at the truth that 'ecstasy' for Dickinson is allied to her vision of the Ultimate. In the words of Charles R. Anderson, "Its [vision's] essence is longing, with ecstasy at one end and pain at the other, the leap of the heart and the despair of the mind."¹⁶

That 'ecstasy' is of a higher plane becomes clear when we read poem 129. Here the first stanza runs as under :

Cocoon above ! Cocoon below !
Stealthy Cocoon, why hide you so
What all the world suspect ?
An hour, and gay on every tree
Your secret, perched in ecstasy
Defies imprisonment !
(p. 60).

Man is a mysterious creature; he hides himself in deceptions. But the joy of an hour 'perched in ecstasy' breaks down all boundaries. Thus, ecstasy has the power in it to sublimate a man, to consecrate him. Ecstasy can lead him to immortality, to eternity, to deathlessness.

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CHAPTER - V

IMAGERY AND SYMBOLISM

There is a rich repertory of imagery and symbolism in Emily Dickinson's poetry. An 'image' is a verbal picture, a picture made of words, and its use makes the expression concise, compact and condensed. The repeated use of an image comes to assume a certain signification, a pointed meaning, and then the image turns into a 'symbol'. As Dickinson uses images and symbols in an impressive way, she is called 'an imagist'. Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant calls her 'an early imagist' who offers us "starkness of vision, quintessentialness of expression, boldness and solidity of thought, and freedom of form".¹

(a) Dickinson's Imagery

For her imagery, Dickinson did not go abroad; she dug it out of her native granite. Her subtle and elliptical verse becomes pointed and concentrated due to her imagery. It was through it that she could bring infinity and eternity at her door. She poignantly expresses this idea in the following:

Adventurer most unto itself
The Soul condemned to be ;
Attended by a Single Hound -
Its own Identity.

(Poem 822.p.399)

Keeping this quality of hers in mind, Elizabeth S. Sergeant brands her “one of the rarest flowers the sterner New England ever bore...”²

Often Dickinson derives her images from the World of Nature . She mingles the common place with natural details. Take the poem “I’ll Tell You How the Sun Rose” as an example. It begins with a personal pronoun, and goes on to record highly individual insights into a common experience. In the second line, she playfully interprets the sunrise in terms of feminine fineries — “A ribbon at a time”— a conceit paralleled, in the next stanza, by the image of ladylike hills “untying their bonnets”. A comparison of the light with darting squirrels, then two things of common place scene — steeples ‘swimming’ in ‘aenethyst’ and bobolinks bursting into song — and then the soft soliloquy of the watcher, give the effect of the dawn. The end of the day is reported impressionistically by such figures as involve children climbing a stile and a ‘dominie’ putting up posture bars and leading away his flock. Thus, all the details “come from ordinary observations, and their very commonplaceness gives the interpretation a unique appeal”.³ The poem may be less internal in thought and feeling than many others by Emily Dickinson, but its imagery is fairly representative of the commonplace. This is the poem under discussion:

I’ll tell you how the Sun rose, —
 A Ribbon at a time —
 The steeples swam in Amethyst —
 The news, like Squirrels, ran..
 The Hills untied their Bonnets —

The Bobolinks — began —
 Then I said softly to myself —
 “That must have been the Sun”!

 But how he set — I know not —
 There seemed a purple stile
 That Yellow boys and girls
 Were climbing all the while —
 Till when they reached the other side,
 A Dominie in Gray —
 Put gently up the evening Bars —
 And led the flock away — .⁴

(Poem 318).

Here the homespun imagery fuses with the thoughts and whimsies of Dickinson.

The poem “After great pain, a formal feeling comes” is vividly imagistic in its details. It focuses upon the benumbed and prostrate sensibility of the poet. Mark how it runs:

After great pain, a formal feeling comes —
 The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs —
 The stiff Heart questions was it He, that bore,
 And Yesterday, or Centuries before?
 The Keet, mechanical, go round —
 Of Ground, or Air, or Ought —
 A Wooden way
 Regardless grown,

A Quartz contentment, like a stone —
 This is the Hour of Lead —
 Remembered, if outlived,
 As Freeing persons, recollect the Snow —
 First — Chill — then Stupor— then the letting go—

(Poem 341; p.162).

Here the expression 'The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs' brings out a graphic picture of the nerves sitting straight like tombs. The feet are seen 'mechanical' in automatic movement. Similarly, 'a wooden way' and 'a Quartz contentment, like a stone' are also perfectly imagistic. We can both feel and touch the 'way' and 'contentment'. Even 'contentment' is concretized, and looks like a stone. The 'heart' in the first stanzas evokes the image of stasis, and this image is reinforced by 'the Hour of Lead' in the third and final stanza. The choice of delirium of pain captures the reader's attention— 'First — chill — then Stupor — then the letting go'. The poet's sensibility seems to be stupefied. On the whole, the poem suggests "a kinaesthetic and puppet-like automatic movement".⁵ The memory of timeless pain struggles to recall time. The concrete objects like 'Tombs', 'Wooden way', 'Quartz contentment', 'Stone', and 'head' present a vivid picture of death, with which Dickinson was so intimate.

The poem "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain" portrays a psychopathological condition of the mind. Here the poet introduces a sustained metaphor of 'funeral'.

I felt a Funeral, in my Brain
 And Mourners to and far

Kept treading — treading — till it seemed
 That Sense was breaking through —
 And when they all mere seated,
 A Service, like a Drum —
 Kept beating — beating — till I thought
 My Mind was going numb —
 And then I heard them lift a Box
 And creak across my Soul
 With those same Boots of Leed, again,
 Then, Space — began to toll

(Poem 280; pp.128 129).

These are the first three stanzas of the poem. The allegory of funeral, which is psychogenic in origin, which compares to a psychic trauma. According to Mohammad Mansoor Khan, “The psycho-drama is structured on the pagan-Christian funeral ritual”.⁶ The last line of stanza 1 starts the process of dying. The drum-bearing accompanies the funeral, and such words as ‘treading-treading’, ‘beating, beating’, ‘creak’, etc. reinforce its rhythm. The metaphor of funeral gets intensified by all means. The protagonist in the poem exhibits a neurotic consciousness.

The poem numbered 510 employs a highly suggestive imagery to express the sensuous experience at the physical level. The poem partly runs thus:

It was not Death, for I stood up,
 And all the Dead, lie down —
 It was not Night, for all the cells

Put out their Tongues, for Noon.

It was not Frost, for on my Flesh

I felt Siroccos — crawl —

Nor Fire — for just my Morble Feet

Could keep a Channel, cool —

(p.)

The opening line images the erect figure that does not resemble the prostrate corpse. Similarly, the pealing bells indicated the time of noon, not the time of night. The second stanza, quoted above, metaphorically shows that the blow of 'Siroccos' does not stimulate or crawling sensation in the erect figure. The poem presents a metaphoric death (not the actual one) for the poet-person.

Dickinson takes her images from her disappointment in love, from her experiences of pain and ecstasy, from the world of Nature. Thus, in poem 165, anguish turns out to be the source of ecstasy of movement or action. The first two stanzas of this poem are given below for illustration:

A Wounded Deer — leaps highest —

I've heard the Hunter tell —

'Tis but the Ecstasy of death —

And then the Brake is still !

The Smitten Rock that gushes !

The trampled Steel that springs !

A Cheek is always redder

First where the Hectic springs !

(p. 77).

In this poetic excerpt, Dickinson draws her images from both the animate and the inanimate worlds to describe her ecstasy. Among the animate objects are the wounded deer, the hunter, and a cheek, and among the inanimate objects are the brake, the smitten rock and the trampled steel.

Sometimes Dickinson's imagery comes to dwell on the question of 'wife' and 'woman'. Thus, in poem 199, she frankly says :

I'm "wife" — I've finished that —
 That other state —
 I'm Czar — I'm "Woman" now —
 It's safer so —

 How odd the Girl's life looks
 Behind this soft Eclipse —
 I think that Earth feels so
 To folks in Heaven — now —

 This being comfort — then
 That other kind — was pain —
 But why compare ?
 I'm "Wife" ! Stop there !
 (p. 94).

The achievement of the status of 'wife' occasions an apt comparison between a mature woman and the earth. In this status, the poet-persona feels more secure and comfortable than when she was a girl. The expression "I'm Czar" adds a touch of royalty to wifedom. Words are picked up here with a good deal of consideration.

In poem 1737, the above status of wifehood is described, through some bold, suggestive strokes, with a sense of despair. Just two stanzas of this poem are quoted below:

Rearrange a "Wife's" affection !
 When they dislocate my Brain !
 Amputate my freckled Bosom !
 Make me bearded like a man !

 Blush, my spirit, in thy Fastness —
 Blush, my unacknowledged clay —
 Seven years of troth have taught thee
 More than Wifehood ever may
(p. 704).

The poet employs metaphorical diction in this given passage to describe the attainment of wifehood. And a mere thought of wifely affection, as discovered in the opening stanza, involves "a process of violent psychic transformation described in terms of violence — physical mutilation of 'Brain' and 'freckled Bosom', and a total expurgation of the feminine identity".⁷ In the second stanza, we find the elevation of 'troth' over 'Wifehood'. The 'troth' under reference is the truth of love cultivated for seven long years. The third stanza (which is not given above) offers us a mechanical image in "Love that never leaped its socket". The image suggests a controlled love, though it is really painful to the poet-persona. The ecstasy of love finds an outlet in this poem, and in the final analysis it steals a march over wifely love.

In respect of imagery, Dickinson bears close stylistic parallels with Keats. Like the great Romantic poet, Dickinson uses “images with extraordinary power of suggestion”.⁸ The suggestive power of her imagery evokes both sympathy and empathy in the reader. A sympathetic identification with readers is indicated in the following lines :

Several of Nature's People
I know, and they know me —
I feel for them or transport
Of cordiality —
(Poem 986, Stanza IV; p.460).

The empathic identification takes place on the imaginative level such as in the poem “The Wind — tapped like a tired Man”. Two examples of empathy in Emily's poetry are given below :

Lethargic pools resume the whirl
Of last year's sundered tune !
From some old Fortress on the sun
Baronial Bees — march — one by one —
In murmuring platoon !
(Poem 64; p. 33).

and :

The Morning — fluttered — staggered —
felt feebly — for Her Crown —
Her unanointed forehead —
Henceforth — Her only One !
(Poem 232; p.106).

Here in the first passage, 'pools' are presented as 'lethargic' on the imaginative plane ; and in the second one, the 'Morning' is portrayed like a wearied man.

Dickinson, once again like Keats, displays a preference for tactile imagery.⁸ When the poet shows a predilection for touch or taste in his poetry, this sort of imagery is found. For instance,

Buzz the dull flies — on the chamber window —
 Brave — shines the Sun through the freckled pane —
 Fearless — the cobweb swings from the ceiling —

(Poem 187; p.88).

This stylistic device of using tactile imagery enables the poet to sense organic motion with an unusual insight. This is how Dickinson pictures the advent of a storm:

The creature chuckled on the Roofs —
 And whistled in the air —
 And shook their fists —
 And gnashed their teeth —
 And swung their frenzied hair.

(Poem 198; p.93).

This poetic extract graphically presents the storm as a 'creature', as a living being. And in it the reader comes n unmistakable sense of hurried motion, which verily demonstrates the great force and fury with which the storm was ranging at that time.

Some of the recurrent images to be found in Emily's poetry : flowers, spiders, bees, wars, voyages of exploration, lightning, and volcanoes. Besides, there are geometrical images and surrealistic images in it. The flower-image is clearly witnessed in the following :

For thee to bloom, I'll skip the tomb
 And row my blossoms o'er !
 Pray gether —
 Anemone —
 Thy flower — forevermore.
 (Poem 31; p.20).

It is said that the flower-image reflects the poet's feminine sensibility. The flower, especially the rose, signifies natural beauty for Miss Emily. In poem 56, she writes thus :

If I should chase to bring a Rose
 Upon a festal day,
 'Twill be because beyond the Rose
 I have been called away —
 (p.30).

So, the 'rose' becomes a symbol of the ephemeral, and beyond it lies eternity. The bee-image is found in so many poems, such as in the following:

From some old Fortress on the sun
 Baronial Bees — march — one by one —
 In murmuring platoon.
 (Poem 64; p.33).

The poet at times identifies herself with the 'bee', with its royal nature. Hence she calls the bees 'Baronial Bees'. Also, the bee has a musical quality about it, like the poetess herself.

(b) Her Symbolism

Dickinson's poetry is not the poetry of direct statement but one of obliquity and indirectness. The poetess expresses her thoughts and feelings by means of evocative images. Though it is somewhat difficult to say where an image becomes a symbol, but we do come across some recurring images in Dickinson's poetry and they assume the role of symbols. But most of her poems are 'the short swallow flights of fancy', and owing to this images are more common in her than symbols.

One of the symbols in Dickinson's early poetry is that of 'King'. This symbol has a special meaning in her verse. It is "an archetypal symbol"⁹ and has a universal application. It is not a literary symbol, and stands for the royal power. According to William Zindall, an archetypal symbol "consists of an articulation of verbal elements that, going beyond reference and the limits of discourse, embodies and offers a complex of feeling and thought".¹⁰ Dickinson's symbols are not private, and yet they derive their import from her intensely lived life in isolation. Her symbols are, therefore, subordinated to language structure, and come to assume a public character.

Poem no.103 deals with 'King' as a lover whose silence evokes a chain of subjective reactions in the persona's mind. The opening stanza runs thus:

I have a King, who does not speak —
 So — wondering — thro' the hours week
 I trudge the day away —
 Half glad when it is night, and sleep,
 If, haply, thro' a dream, to peap
 In parlors, shut by day.

(p. 50).

The poem is rich in symbolic import, and Dickinson uses an unconventional idiom in it. Occasionally the symbol of 'King' is used for the heavenly Father (who governs the entire universe).

In poem 166, 'King' symbolises some preceptor in real life — God, the Muse, or even Death. The first stanza of the poem reads as under :

I met a King this afternoon !
 He had not on a Crown indeed;
 A little Palmleaf Hat was all,
 And he was barefoot, I'm afraid !

(p. 78).

The image of 'King' as a royal personage is not to be found here. He is portrayed to be 'barefoot'. Perhaps the poet wants to create a paradox by using such words as 'barefoot'. The noted critic, Ruth Miller, thinks that the 'barefoot' condition of 'King' shows Dickinson's "conception of the unique quality of her poetry".¹¹ Another distinguished critic, Theodora Ward, reads the poem in terms of love, and suggests that the 'King' is a symbol of a living person who "held god-like potentialities".¹² This

symbol enables the poet to experience the wholeness of life. The image of a royal person in the quoted stanza startles us by showing him without his royal garb and depriving him of his coach. He is adorned with 'Palmleaf', which is a traditional symbol of victory.

Another symbol frequently used in Dickinson's poetry is that of the flower-bee. The first reference to this symbol is made in poem no.1 (which was written in 1850) :

The bee doth court the flower, the flower his suit receives,
And they make merry wedding, whose guests are hundred leaves....
(p. 3).

The flower-bee symbolism is used on two levels — the level of poetry and the level of love.¹³ On the level of poetry, the bee is the humming poet who derives his inspiration from the nectar of flower. Thus, in poem 230, Dickinson writes as follows :

We — Bee and I — live by the quaffing —
'Tisn't all Hock — with us —
Life has its Ale —

Line no.5 in the second stanza directly mentions 'Nectar' and line no.6 'a humming Coroner'. Dickinson is apparently influenced by Keats and Emerson in making use of the flower-bee symbolism.¹⁴ In his poem, "To My Brother George", Keats pens down in this way :

That the still murmur of the honey-bee
Would never teach rural song to me :

(ll. 12-13).

And Emerson in his poem “The Humble Bee” writes as follows :

Burly, dozing, humble-bee,
Where thou art is clime for me

(Stanza 1).

Dickinson’s idea of poetic inspiration approximates the romantic theory of supersensuous source of poetry.¹⁵

On the level of love, the flower-bee symbolism denotes love as a universal force. For this symbol, Dickinson is apparently influenced by Elizabeth Burret Browning :

.... The recurrence of the flower-bee imagery in poems on the theme of love in different periods of Dickinson’s poetic career, sustains an agreement for its source in Mrs. Browning’s poetry.¹⁶

One such poem where the flower-bee symbolism clearly comes out is “Come slowly — Eden”, which runs as follows :

Come slowly — Eden !
Lips unused to Thee —
Bashful — sip thy Jessamines —
At the fainting Bee —

Reaching late his flower,
Round her chamber hums —
Counts his nectars —
Enters — and is lost in Balms.

(Poem 211; p.98).

'Eden' in this poem is the poet's image for both the garden of Eden and the state of physical love. 'Bashful' suggests hesitancy that eludes consummation on the verge of surrender to the heavenly bliss of love. The verbs 'counts' and 'enbers' (in the second stanza) are analogues of action corresponding to 'Bashful' sipping of 'Lips'. As soon as the lover enters into the balmy flesh of the beloved, he gets 'lost' there. The bee also does the same — sipping nectar from the lips (petals) of the flower and then entering into it to get lost there. Thus, the flower-bee symbolism powerfully evokes the image of an intense love-making. The 'flower' is Nature's analogue for 'Eden'. In poem 219, too, 'Eden' is mentioned :

Rowing in Eden —
 Ah, the Sea !
 Might I but moor — Tonight —
 In Thee ! (p. 114).

The poet evidently longs for sensuous luxury and fulfilment of love, though she is also aware of the tantalizing brevity of it. The 'Sea' indicates the depth of her love. With whom ? — it is an intriguing question. Some of her lovely fetters have been addressed to Abiah Root, who seem to have stirred her feelings. This is how she writes to Root in one of her letters (dated 6th November, 1847) :

Your affectionate letter was joyfully received and I wish that this might make you as happy as your's did me.¹⁷

In another letter (dated 29th October, 1848) she writes to Root thus :

Six long months have tried hard to make us strangers, but I love you better than ever notwithstanding the link which bound us in that golden chain is sadly dimmed, I feel more reluctant to lose you from that bright circle, whom I've called my friends¹⁸

In a third (dated 7th and 17th May, 1850), she writes like this :

Where are you now Abiah, where are your thoughts, and aspirings, where are your young affections, not with the boots, and whiskers; any with me ungrateful, any tho' drooping, dying ?¹⁹

These letters suggest the revelation of a secret possibility — that Miss Emily was probably in love with Abiah Root, one time her classmate. Many poems of Emily Dickinson are composed on the theme of love (as we saw in Chapter III).

Sometimes Emily Dickinson employs the symbol of 'butterfly' in her poetry. And this symbol is a referent to her phenomenology of evolution and imperfection. So many of her poems reveal her consciousness of clock-time which comes to a stop with the arrival of death. The awareness of death in Dickinson "develops into a calculated strategy to face the terror of death" and "enables the consciousness to absorb of shock of mortality where death is imaged as a courtly lover, a gentleman caller, a buzzing fly".²⁰ As we know, Dickinson's many poems are on pain and death, and in them death is often awarded a sculptural concrete shape. Usually, the moment of death is the moment of shock which suspends motion into stillness. Poems like "*After great pain, a*

formal feeling comes" (Poem no.341), "*It was not Death, for I stood up*" (Poem no. 510) and "*I felt a Funeral, in my Brain*" are all of this nature.

In Dickinson's poetry, God is always busy in creation and death is recurring feature. Thus, her poetic world is full of drama and action, beauty and motion. In poem no. 64, the second stanza featuring 'Butterflies' is pertinent to quote in this connection:

The dreamy Butterflies bester !
 Lethargic pools resume the whirl
 Of last year's sundered tune!
 From some old Fortress on the sun
 Baronial Bees — march — one by one —
 In murmuring platoon!

(p.33)

This is a remarkable piece of natural description packed with beauty and motion. Poem no. 66 powerfully expresses the poet's sense of wonder in watching plants and butterflies:

So from the mould
 Scarlet and Gold
 Many a Bulb will rise —
 Hidden away, cunningly,
 From sagacious eyes.

So from Cocoon
 Many a Worm

Heap so Highland gay,

Peasants like me,

Peasants like Thee

Garze perplexedly !

(p.35)

The supine security of the plant and the concealment of the butterfly in the security of the cocoon show the instinct of life to fall into a state of inertia.²¹

But the butterfly is not content with the security of the cocoon, and hence leaps art of it.

The butterfly phenomenon is for Dickinson a miracle of evolution.

This is how the poet describes the butterfly in poem no. 173:

A fuzzy fellow, without feet

Yet dooh exceeding run

Of velvet is, his Countenance,

And his Complexion, dun!

Sometime, he dwelleth in the grass!

Sometime, upon a bough,

From which he doth descend in phuh

Upon the passer-by!

... ..

Then, finer than a baby,

Emerges in the spring!

A Feather on each shoulder!

You'd scarce recognise him!

By Men, yclept Caterpillar!
 By me ! But who am I,
 To tell the pretty secret
 Of the Butterfly!

(p. 82).

As described here, the butterfly is in the chrysalis stage, and it emerges from the state of inertia into the state of motion or action. The butterfly is impelled by and urge for adventure.

The butterfly feels a great joy at the newly discovered liberty of flying in the poem "He parts Himself like leaves":

He parts Himself — like leaves —
 And then — He closes up —
 Then stands upon the Bonnet
 Of Any Buttercup —

 And then He runs against
 And oversets a Rose —
 And then does Nothing —
 Then away upon a Jib — He goes —

 And dangles like a Mole
 Suspended in the Noon —
 Uncertain — to return Below —
 Or settle in the Moon —

(Poem 517; pp. 252-53).

These are the first three stanzas of the poem, picturing the butterfly on its unbridled flight, then alighting on some flower and then again taking to the wings.

Poem no. 1099 shows the symbol of 'butterfly' being used as an art symbol. This is how the poem runs :

My Cocoon tightens — Colors tease —
 I'm feeling for the Air —
 A dim capacity for Wings
 Demeans the Dress I wear —
 A power of Butterfly must be —
 The aptitude to fly
 Meadows of Majesty implies
 And easy Sweeps of Sky —
 So I must baffle at the Hint
 And Cipher at the Sign
 And make much blunder, if at last
 I talk the clue divine —
 (p)

The 'cocoon' is an analogue for body, whereas the 'butterfly' for liberty to fly. The poet is really fond of the butterfly enjoying freedom in its flight. By now, we have marked, through several examples, the prevalence of the butterfly-symbol. Sometimes it is a symbol of life, motion and action, and sometimes it is a symbol of death, inertia and inaction. But it is a haunting

natural symbol for the poet by all means. According to Mohammad Mansoor Khan, "The aptitude of the butterfly for flight after discarding the cocoon has the symbolic import of the body-soul relationship."²¹ Just as the butterfly enjoys freedom after discarding the cocoon, be the soul enjoys immense liberty after leaving the body.

To conclude, some of the images and symbols examined above are the dominant ones to be found in Emily Dickinson's poetry. Combinedly, "they allude to the figurative and symbolic significance of her thoughtful poetry.

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CHAPTER - VI

AN INQUIRY INTO DICKINSONIAN THEORY
AND PRACTICE OF POETRY

Emily Dickinson was a conscious artist who knew what she was busy doing. It was in 1860 that she discovered herself to be a poet and began to develop a professional interest in her craft. Her models were "the famous women writers of her day",¹ and she particularly admired George Eliot, the Brontes, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning. But for Emerson, no literary man seems to have influenced her. She had procured a biography of George Eliot from the Boston publisher, Thomas Nites, in April, 1882. She possessed portraits of Mrs. Browning, and A. Mary F. Robenson's biography of Emile Bronte. Her knowledge of Charlotte Bronte goes without questioning. She had, somehow or the other, come to identify "lies as masculine" as well as "religious orthodoxy as masculine".² She considered womanhood as an embodiment of truth, beauty, honesty, and religious tolerance, and she vented this feeling of hers in her poetry.

In reality, Dickinson's earliest known poem is a valentine dated 4th March, 1850, beginning with "Awake ye muses nine". In 1858, she gathered some fifty poems into packets. There are nearly one hundred so transcribed in 1859, about sixty-five in 1860, and more than eighty in 1861. By 1862, Dickinson's creative drive "must have been awesome".³ During this year, she put into packet no fewer than three hundred and sixty-six

poems, which were certainly complete and final. Though Dickinson wrote so many poems, she published only four or five of them in her lifetime.

Dickinson's early poetry is uniformly sentimental, written by a young poet "in love with the idea of being in love".⁴ Here is one of her love poems:

Heart ! We will forget him !
 You and I — tonight !
 You may forget the warmth he gave —
 I will forget the light !

 When you have done, pray tell me
 That I may straight begin !
 Haste ! lest while you're lagging
 I remember him !

(Poem 47; p.26).

Who is the object of her love ? Nothing can be said with certainty. Maybe it was Abiah Root, or Leonard Humphrey (a teacher at Amherst Academy who died in 1850), or Newton (who also expired early), or Charles Wadsworth (the pastor of the Arch Street Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia from 1850 up to April 1862).

By 1862, Dickinson had discovered her poetic talent and form. She was not a poet of verse libre; she rather employs rhyme and meter in her poetry. Her metres are basically derived from English hymnology. They are "usually iambic or trochaic, but occasionally dactylic", and they were "the metric forms familiar to her from childhood as the measures in which Watts's hymns were composed." Dickinson had procured copies of

Watts's Christian Psalmody and of The Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs. It is believed that she learnt much of prosody from these works, and that she used her rhymes with subtle shades and variations. Through such variations she could express her moods and thoughts and feelings effectively.

Dickinson's rhythmic exactness often goes with an unexpected irregularity. The following poem is a very fine example of both her concern with and indifference to rhyme and metrical exactness:

I taste a liquor never brewed —
 From Tankards scooped in pearl —
 Not all the Frankfort Barries
 Yield such an Alcohol !

 Inebriate of Air — am I —
 And Debauchee of Dew —
 Reeling — thro endless summer days —
 From inns of Molten Blue —

 When "Landlords" turn the drunken Bee
 Out of the Foxglove's door —
 When Butterflies — renounce their "drams" —
 I shall but drink the more !

 Till Seraphs swing their snowy Hats —
 And Saints — to windows run —
 To see the little Tripler
 Weaving against the — sun —

(Poem 214; pp.98-99)

The poetess uses here a peculiar meter, which is broken in at least two ways. The third lines of the first and fourth stanzas are catalectic, and the rhymes of these stanzas are inaccurate. These variations “unquestionably were deliberate, for they are typical of her modifications of traditional forms”.⁶

As in case of rhyme and meter, Dickinson took liberty even with language and grammar. ‘More-often than not, her liberty proved very effective. Her use of the subjunctive mood carves first to our notice. In one place, she says : “Only love assist the wound”. It may be read either as “Only love can assist the wound” or “Only love does assist the wound”. If the latter meaning is taken then what at first seems to be a subjunctive mood might become a continuing or universal present indicative.⁷ Dickinson tried at times to universalize her thought to embrace past, present and future. She allowed her mind to explore the universal facts, such as in the following passages:

Nature — the Gentlest Mother is

And when the Sun go down —

Her Voice among the Aisles

Incite the timid prayer

(Poem 790; p.385).

The Robin is the One

That interrupt the Morn

(Poem 828; p.402).

Here the language has been outraged to cultivate elliptical phrases; there are numerous instances of the violation of grammar. But the poet succeeds admirably in cutting deeply into the quick of her thought. Perhaps Shakespeare was the source of her inspiration in this matter.

Dickinson had an unusual power to evoke a mood, a feeling, a thought in her poetry. In one of her poems, she says : "A Word made Flesh is seldom / And tremblingly partook", adding "A Word that breathes distinctly/Has not the power to die". She knew that the will to select words was not always within her conscious power :

Shall I take thee, the Poet said,
To the propounded word ?
Be stationed with the Candidates
Till I have finer tried

(Poem 1126; p. 505).

In her case, the word came unsummoned and unexpected. She handled her medium of expression in an effective way.

Dickinson's prosodic expertness was fully achieved in 1862. The exquisite poem, "She lay as if at play", is on the theme of death. The brevity of life is suggested by the short trimeter-dimeter lines. The rhymes are "delicate interplays of suspended, imperfect, and exact sound arrangements", and the poetess "marshals her vowels, both in rhymes and within the lines, in such a way as to suffuse with such a poem as "I had no time to Hate" ...⁹ Take the following poem as an example :

"Why do I love" You, Sir ?

Because —

The Wind does not require the Grass

To answer — Wherefore when He pass

She cannot keep Her place.

Because He knows — and

Do not You —

And We know not —

Enough for Us

The Wisdom it be so —

... ..

The Sunrise — Sir — compelleth Me —

Because He's Sunrise — and I see —

Therefore — Then —

I love Thee —

(Poem 480; pp.231-32).

Here in the final line the reader should mark the shift from iambic to a trochaic beat, and this shift has been very cleverly manipulated. What surprises him is the technical skill with which the diction is controlled.

As Dickinson's poetic practice advances into maturity, she comes to enjoy greater freedom in the handling of her meters and rhythms. One comes across quatrains frequently, but she does not hesitate to use a three-line stanza, as in "I rose because he sank", or a five-line stanza, as in "Glee, the great storm is over". At times, Dickinson breaks the regularity of a stanza in order to gain a new kind of emphasis, or she splits a line from

its stanza, permitting it to stand apart, as in “Beauty — be not caused — It Is” and “There’s been a Death, in the Opposite House”. Sometimes the poetess begins a poem with an iambic beat but hurriedly shifts to a trochaic (as seen above), to hasten the tempo, such as in “In falling timbers buried”. Also, she uses her dashes lavishly, creating problems for a reader.

Dickinson composed erotic poetry at times. In one of her love poems, she writes as follows :

Wild Nights — Wild Nights !

Were I with thee

Wild Nights should be

Over luxury !

Futile — the Winds —

To a Heart in port —

Done with the Compass —

Done with the Chart !

Rowing in Eden —

Ah, the Sea !

Might I but moor — Tonight —

In Thee !

(Poem 249; p.114).

Here the poetess employs sexual imagery with water frankness. She speaks of the ‘luxury’ to be derived from the raging Wild Nights, when the heart is in violent passion and yet so long it has remained innocent. The

idea of 'innocence' is to be sensed in 'Rowing in Eden'. The 'Sea' shows the depth of her passion or emotion. All the erotic imagery is drawn here from the world of Nature. One more love poem that catches our attention immediately is the following :

How sick — to wait — in any place — but thine —
 I knew last night — when someone tried to twine —
 Thinking — perhaps — that I looked tired — or alone —
 Or breaking — almost — with unspoken pain —

And I turned — ducal —
That right — was thine —
One port — suffices — for a Briz — like mine —

Ours be the tossing — wild though the sea —
 Rather than a Mooring — unshared by thee.
 Our's be the Cargo unladen — here —
 Rather than the "spicy isles" —
 And thou — not there —

(Poem 368; p.175).

The water imagery is conspicuous in this poem. The mood of the poet is mercurial here. It is an instance of "erotic poetry".¹⁰

For one thing, Dickinson covers up a wide range of experience in her poetry. So, her poetry is not the poetry of escape (unlike the Romantics). She confronted "all the facts of life that came within her experience, seeking to record all she could learn of ecstasy or anguish, and

stating her conclusions without palliation".¹¹ She expressed her experiences in lyric form, or as she used to call it the psalm or hymn. Like a genuine artist, she never arrived at a pat solution or easy formula.

Dickinson's poetry abounds in, as George F. Whicher puts it, "dislocations of syntax and other verbal abnormalities"¹². When we consider Dickinson's grammatical lapses, we discover that they spring from one or another of the following causes : her preference for vernacular idiom, her old-fashioned training, her use of poetic mannerisms which she did not employ in prose, and her omission of verbal connective tissue in the effort to secure the utmost condensation of thought.¹³

Miss Emily's liking for compactness of expression is everywhere manifest. Short words and expressions pleased her. The six nouns that frequently occur in her poetry are (in order of frequency), "day, life, eye, sun, man, heaven. All of them, with the exception of the last one, are monosyllables. Besides 'heaven', the other polysyllables that she often used are 'summer' and 'morning'. When she did not find short words, she sometimes contrived to shorten them; for example, she wrote "The daily own of ove" rather than "The daily possession of love". Also, she preferred uncommon coinages like 'graspless', 'escapeless' and 'perturbless' from 'ungraspable', 'inescapable' and 'imperturbable'. She even tried 'vital-less' which is quite illogical like Shakespeare, she made a habit of abbreviating past participial objectives derived from verbs ending in 't', as 'create' for 'created', 'exert' for 'exerted', 'complicate' for 'complicated'. Similarly, it was briefer to say "Much billow hath the sea" rather than Many billows.

Dickinson's gnomic condensation is born of her mental alertness. She does not encourage a dreamy visualization on the reader's part. Her remarkable concision is reflected vividly in the following extract :

The fashion of the Ear
Attireth that it hear
In Dun or fair.

So whether, it be Rune,
Or whether it be none
Is of within.

The Tune is in the Tree —
The skeptic — showeth me —
“No, Sir ! In Thee !”

(Poem 526; p.257).

Though the thought of the poem could be stated flatly in prose, no paraphrase is easily possible to convey “a gnarled, compact vitality, like that of a tree growing just below “timber line”.¹⁴ And it is precisely this communicable energy of mind that we value most in Dickinson's poetry. Of course, she tends to become obscure at places, but her obscurities are less frequent and less baffling than those of Donne, or Browning, or George Meredith, or G.M. Hopkins.

Some of Dickinson's obscurities arise from the irregularity of her rhymes. Her poetic practice ran directly counter to the nicety in rhyming that was so carefully observed by most of the poets of her generation. An old-school critic like Aldrich was highly critical of Dickinson for her failure

in making rhymes chine; he thought that her rhymes were an evidence of slovenly workmanship. More recently, her off-colour rhymes have been praised as an anticipation of the studied inexactness introduced by such poets as Humbert Wolfe, John Crowe Ransom, and Archibald Macweish. It is argued that Dickinson's inexactness is the result of her studied art, and that it is an "effective method of communicating her sense of fracture and discard in the world of her poetic vision".¹⁵

The noted critic, George F. Whicher, thinks that Dickinson has used at least five types of rhyme in her verse, and they may be classified as (1) Identical rhyme, (2) Exact rhyme, (3) Imperfect rhyme, (4) Vowel rhyme, and (5) Suspended rhyme.¹⁶ The first type of rhyme employs the same vowel sound preceded and followed by identical consonants. Sometimes the rhyme-words are identical in sound but different in sense, as in French usage — gold-marigold; seal-conceal, etc. The exact rhyme is often used by the poet. It suggests that irregular rhyme is to be avoided. In Dickinson's verse, double or feminine rhymes are very rare. In the imperfect rhyme, two words ending on the same vowel sound are used, but they are followed by different consonants. This sort of approximation is rather common in folk-poetry and hymns. Examples are : us-dyst; gained-spade; stripped-picked; etc. The vowel rhyme is found when a word ending in any other vowel sound. English poetry generally permits the laxity of rhyming final '-y' with either 'be' or 'die'. But Dickinson took liberty in extending its otherwise limited use. Examples are: 'be die', 'boy-by', 'me-say', 'low-sky', 'goy-cruckfy', etc. And, lastly, the suspended rhyme is discovered when two words end in different vowel sounds to be

followed by the same consonant. This is the most common form of approximate rhyme. Some of its examples are: 'blossom-blossom', 'woman-human-common', human-even-given', etc.

A consideration of Dickinson's poetic theory and practice reveal the truth that she was an unusually talented writer. Not only that there is wide variety of themes (as seen in Chapter III) in her poetry, her use of language and verse-technique is also full of variety and richness. It is not suggested that her poetry is faultless and polished. It is rather "startlingly rough and unpolished". There are no doubt, discrepancies of grammar, meter or rhyme, in her poetry. But these discrepancies demonstrate the energy of her mind, the vitality of her creative urge. The oddities of her diction and syntax are largely caused by her innate desire to pack her poems with meaning. That is why she is called a philosopher poet or a metaphysical poet. To quote Thomas H. Johnson, "...in succeeding years she wrote with a vision which gives her rank as a philosophical poet."¹⁸ Like William Blake, she was a visionary to whom truth came with exclusive finality, and like her Puritan predecessors she was 'severe, downright, uncompromising, visionary, factual, sardonic'—all in one. The poet Blake once remarked: 'My business is to create', and Dickinson clearly claims: "My business is circumference". And we know that the physical centre of that circumference was the town of Amherst (New England), with all its charms and beauties. The 'circumference' of the town and its surroundings, the intellectual and religious fervour of New England (including the transcendentalism of Emerson and Thoreau) affected the poetic theory and practice of Emily Dickinson in a great measure.

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CHAPTER - VII

CONCLUSION

In the foregoing chapters, we have taken a stock of Emily Dickinson as a poet of Romantic sensibility. It has been suggested that Dickinson may be approached from various angles, and that scholars have made textual, interpretative and biographical approaches to a study of her writings. While these various approaches are valid and pertinent in their own way, the novelty and freshness of approach are found in the Romantic approach. As we know, Dickinson is usually studied as a transcendentalist, a metaphysician, a mystical poet, as a Nature poet, but rarely as a Romantic poet. This vacuum has been filled up by the present critical study.

As a Romantic poet, Dickinson did not belong to the Romantic movement proper. She was certainly familiar with some Romantic works, especially with those of Lord Byron. But she was not directly influenced by any one of them. Clearly, she was deeply affected by the great American writer, Ralph Waldo Emerson, as well as by the great ascetic of the Walden Bond, Henry David Thoreau. During her time, Emerson was at the height of his career, and he was living only sixty miles away. His poems appeared when she was seventeen. When she was twenty, Hawthorne published The Scarlet Letter and The House of Seven Gables the next year. About the same time — precisely in 1851 — Melville published his Moby Dick. In 1850 was published the first collected edition of Edgar Alon Be's poems. When Emily was twenty-four, Thoreau's Walden came out, and when she was twenty-five, Leagues of Grass by

Walt Whitman appeared. So, it may be said that Emily Dickinson started writing her poems at a time when American literature was in its full bloom. Of all the living authors, Emily was deeply influenced by Emerson. According to Conrad Aiken, "...she lacked the energy or effrontery to voyage out into the unknown in search of such companionship; and she became easily a prey to the then current Emersonian doctrine of mystical individualism".¹ It may be mentioned here that Emily's "extreme self-seclusion and secrecy was both a protest and a display — a kind of variety masquerading as modesty."² The problems of good and evil, of life and death, the nature and destiny of the human soul; and Emerson's theory of compensation — all these kept the young poetess under spell.

Before we begin examining some of Dickinson's themes as discovered in her poetry (establishing a link between her and the Romantics), it is proper to throw light on the background of her upbringing against which she revolted. Dickinson was born and bred in the Calvinistic tradition. Though she imbibed this tradition in the form of her cultural heritage, she could not wholly conform to its rigours. A revolt against this tradition naturally makes her a follower of Byron (who was all against tyrannies and oppressions of any sort). She had also read Walter Scott's tales, but she did not literally follow his method of Romantic writing. She rather followed "her own star",³ and displayed her Romantic sensibility in her poetry. The noted scholar, Henry W. Wells, rightly thinks that "The contrasted seeds of mysticism and Stoicism took root in Emily's mind only because of her own personality, but through a congenial ground prepared for them by romantic sensibility."⁴ It is not needed to define 'romanticism'

or to detail its essential features here, but briefly we may examine her themes and other related matters.

Dickinson largely writes about herself — her own emotions and thoughts, her own situations and circumstances — in her poetry. Subjectivism forms the core of her poetic art. Her egoistic strain, her wonderful lyricism, and her subjective leanings make her a poet of the Romantic tradition. By her temperament, Dickinson was an introvert and a recluse, and as such she was quite suited to be a subjective Romantic. Ordinary men and women often live life on physical plane of reality, but Dickinson took delight in withdrawing herself into her private world. This is how she presents herself in one of her poems :

It might be lonelier
 Without the Loneliness —
 I'm so accustomed to my Fate —
 Perhaps the Other — Peace —

 Would interrupt the Dark —
 And crowd the little Room —
 Too scant — by Cubis — to contain
 The Sacrament — of Him —

(Poem 405, p.193).

The poet tells us about her situation of loneliness — which is her 'fate' — and her life of 'peace' and sacredness. Her private world is free from violence and turbulence, and it is full of impenetrable calmness and quietness, as to be seen in the following :

I can wade Grief —
 Whole fools of it —
 I'm used to that —
 But the least push of, Joy
 Breaks up my feet —
 And I tip — drunken —

(Poem 252; p.115).

This quoted extract is perfectly personal in subject-matter, and the personal or egotistic touch is quite in keeping with the Romantic tradition. Such a piece of poem as quoted above moves readers deeply, as pointed out by Archibald Macheish :

There is a poem [No.252] of Emily's which none of us can read unmoved — which moves me, I confess, so deeply that I cannot always read it. It is a poem which, in another voice, might indeed have cried aloud, but in hers is quiet.⁵

Being true to her private world, Dickinson maintained her distinct voice even at the cost of conventionality and current practice. She cared little for Lanier's and other contemporaries' practice in poetry, and stood apart as a poet of 'inspiration' and 'transcendence'. Perhaps this is the reason that the noted critic, F.O. Matthiessen, calls her a 'private poet'. He observes : "Her work — and its editing — present all the peculiar problems of the private poet".⁶ Then, she is a private poet because she follows an instinctive approach to poetry. In this matter, she recalls G.M. Hopkins to our minds. But whereas Hopkins was a deliberate experimenter with the

poetic form, Dickinson was not so. To quote Malthiessen once again, "Her process was almost wholly instinctive."⁷

Dickinson is a poet of Nature who is frequently drawn to its multifaceted scenes and sights, its charms and beauties, as well as to its ferocious and restless aspects. She wrote on flowers and bees, birds and beasts, caterpillars and butterflies, hills and mountains, and on lightnings and volcanoes, and myriad other things found in Nature. In one of her poems she clarifies her view of Nature :

"Nature" is what we see —
 The Hill — the Afternoon —
 Squirrel — Eclipse — the Bumble bee —
 Nay — Nature is Heaven —

 Nature is what we hear —
 The Bobolink — the Sea —
 Thunder — the Cricket —
 Nay — Nature is Harmony —

(Poem 668; p.332).

Evidently, the poet thinks that what we see and hear is Nature. Moreover, it is harmony and heaven-like. The various objects mentioned above are the manifestations of Nature. For the poet, natural objects are not so important in themselves, but they become important because they convey her perceptions. This attitude of the poet is so evident in the following poem :

Perception of an object costs
 Precise the Object's loss —
 Perception in itself a Gain
 Replying to its Price —
 The Object Absolute — is nought —
 Perception sets it fair
 And then upbraids a Perfectness
 That situates so far —

(Poem 1071; pp.486-87)

By laying emphasis on 'perception', the poet is inclined to look upon Nature as a medium of her perception. In other words, she wants to realise herself through Nature. Also, she derives immense pleasure from her living contact with Nature. Like Keats, she possibly realises that 'A thing of beauty is a joy for ever'. But Conrad Aiken believes that "Her [Emily's] Nature poems ... are not the most secretly revelatory or dramatically compulsive of her poems, nor, on the whole, the best."⁸ Despite what Aiken says, there is an extraordinary delicacy and a deft brevity in her Nature poems, and these qualities render them truly enjoyable and delightful.

Emily Dickinson has written a fairly good number of poems on life and death. It seems, these impulses attracted her inescapably, and she saw ordinariness in living but a dramatic situation in dying. Emily composed poems on human emotions and experiences, human fears and hopes, and freely shared her joys and sorrows with us. In a way, her

poetry offers us the vignettes of life impressively. Success and failure in life are the two sides of the same coin. Speaking of success, she says :

Success is counted sweetest
 By those who ne'er succeed.
 To comprehend a nectar
 Requires sorest need.
 Not one of all the purple Host
 Who took the Flag today
 Can tell the definition
 So clear of Victory

(Poem 67; p.35).

The poet comes out with her own philosophy of life here that 'success' tastes sweetest to those who have never attained it. Similarly, the victor cannot clearly define 'victory' and he can only experience it. According to the poet, the real charm of life is not the attainment of goal but an incessant struggle to reach it. Then, the victor knows that the moments of his proud joy are brief and transient. He is haunted by an overwhelming fear of losing it after a while. The defeated one is, therefore, better placed, for he knows that the worst has already happened to him and that nothing more fearful can happen to him in life. As a fearless individual herself, Emily would opt for death rather than for a dull and dismal life. In one of her stanzas, she writes like this :

One Life of so much Consequence !

Yet I — for it — would pay —

My Soul's entire income —

In ceaseless — salary —

(Poem 270; p.123).

There is a sense of ennui and exhaustion on the part of the poet here. She feels that she has been living at the expense of her soul, and she wants to redress it at the earliest possible. For Emily, life is a mixed tale of sorrow and sunshine, pain and joy. Hope and fear are interspersed in the pages of her poetry. Life as presented by her is the life imaginatively lived with all its ups and downs. By withdrawing from the actual life, the poet gets an opportunity to live the inner life intensely. This is but natural for a confirmed recluse like Dickinson.

Miss Emily has written a large number of poems on the theme of death. She seems to be preoccupied with the thought of mortality as contrasted to the thought of immortality, and both these thoughts capture her mind inescapably. At times the thought of death becomes so obsessive that it turns to be morbid, as nicely suggested by Conrad Aikew :

Death, and the problem of life after death, obsessed her. She seems to have thought of it constantly — she died all her life, she probed death daily Ultimately, the obsession became morbid, and her eagerness for details, after the death of a friend — the hungry desire to know how she died — became almost vulture-like. But the preoccupation, with its horrible uncertainties — its doubts about immortality, its hatred of the flesh, and its many reversals of both positions — gave us her sharpest work.⁹

Emily was intimately familiar with the works of Sir Thomas Browne where she had seen the parade of death and the glimpses of immortality. To her, death is a new kind of life and life as lived on earth is a kind of death. In one of her poems she points death as a gateway to life of vitality. This is how the poet makes a distinction between life and death :

Life is but life ! And Death, but Death !
 Bliss is, but Bliss, and Breath but Breath !
 And if indeed I fail,
 At least, to know the worst, is sweet !
 Defeat means nothing but Defeat,
 No drearier, can befall !

(Poem 172; pp.81-82).

Here life is linked with 'breath' and death with 'bliss'. A man who is prepared for death is free from all fears and all worries. Nothing is more dreadful than death, and yet the valiant must go forward to face it. In this matter, Emily's attitude to death is akin to that of Robert Browning in his poem "Prospice". Browning challenges death as a fighter, and says :

I was ever a fighter, so — one fight more,
 The best and the last !
 I would hate that death bandaged my eyes, and forbore,
 And bade me creep past.
 No! let me taste the whole of it, fare like my peers
 The heroes of old,
 Bear the brunt, in a minute pay glad life's arrears
 Of pain, darkness and cold.¹⁰

Though Emily's attitude towards death is not the same as that of Browning — she does not challenge death like a warrior. She is explicitly in love with death, as may be gathered from her poems. The following poem partly clarifies her attitude :

Wait till the Majesty of Death
Invests so mean a brow !
Almost a powdered Footman
Might dare to touch it now !

Wait till in Everlasting Robes
That Democrat is dressed,
Then prate about "Preferment" —
And "Station", and the rest !

(Poem 171; p.81).

Here the poet mentions death as 'majestic', 'everlasting', and democratic. She is evidently so soft towards death in this poetic extract. But she does not look upon death as distinct from immortality; it rather leads to immortality. In the opinion of Prof. Salamatullah Khan, "Emily Dickinson was ... a seeker after truth and in probing the mystery of death she has at least defined the limits of human knowledge."¹¹

The theme of immortality appears frequently in Dickinson's poetry. It is quite inseparable from the theme of mortality. Dickinson thought deeply about life and death, about life hereafter. The related questions of time and eternity also rocked her mind. As we know, she was of the Puritanic upbringing, but she allowed her mind to probe into the

mysterious nature of eternity and immortality. She though makes the probe into immortality, she does not become an atheist in whom the spring of faith is entirely dried up. The doubts or questions that assail her mind are partly generated by certain events affecting her own life. When one of her loved ones, named Henry Wadsworth, died, she wrote to a clergyman like this : 'Is immortality true ?' Also, the death of her father, mother, sister, and many other intimate friends evoked her doubts and questionings. Dickinson calls 'immortality' 'the House of supposition' in one of her poems, and contrasts it with life on earth. As life is concrete, immortality is abstract. Immortality is a possibility, while life is a reality. The 'house of supposition' is the world of imagination. We can have some idea of what Dickinson thinks of 'immortality' and 'eternity' :

The Soul's Superior instants
Occur to Her — alone —
When friend — and Earth's occasion
Have infinite withdrawn —

Or She — Herself — ascended
To too remote a Height
For lower Recognition
Than Her Omnipotent —

This Mortal Abolition
Is seldom — but as fair
As Apparition — subject
To Autocratic Air —

Eternity's disclosure
 To favorites — a few —
 Of the Colossal substance
 Of Immortality.

(Poem 306; p.144).

So, immortality dawns upon the loss of friends and the world. It is basically the Soul's superior moment when she ascends higher and positions herself besides the Omnipotent (God). When the 'mortal abolition' takes place, eternity discloses 'the colossal substance' of immortality to the select few (who happen to be her favourites).

Another important theme in Dickinson's poetry is love. Who is the inspiration behind her love poetry is a matter of conjecture. Many young men have been mentioned to be the source of her inspiration — Toenjamin Newton, Henry Vaughan, Charles Wadsworth, and Abbiah Root. But it is safer to assume that Dickinson offers an imaginative treatment of the theme of love, just as she had dealt with the themes of death and immortality. Love is shorn of all earthly voluptuousness in her poetry and assumes the character of a mystic force. She elevated love to the mystical and spiritual lane, as physical love was beyond her reach, beyond her taste. Keeping this fact in mind, George P. Whicher observes as under :

Emily Dickinson was the only American poet of her century who treated the great lyric theme of love with entire candor and sincerity. But it is not enough to say of her, as we may say of

Catullus or Burns, that she wrote love poems of extraordinary intensity. The individuality of her contribution lies in the fact that these poems are not merely reiterated expressions of passionate longing and regret, but successive moments in the intricate progress of a soul through the deepest of human experiences.¹²

As a love poet, Dickinson was to accept anything less than an affair with God. So, she says thus :

I could suffice for Him, I knew —
 He — could suffice for Me —
 Yet Hesitating Fractions — Both
 Surveyed Infinity —
 “Would I be Whole” He sudden broached —
 My syllable rebelled —
 ‘Twas face to face with Nature — forced —
 ‘Twas face to face with God —

(Poem 643; p.319).

While she is wedded to the Lord — as Mira Bai was to Lord Krishna in the Hindu context — she knows the great power and significance of love. This is how she defines love :

Love — to anterior to Life —
 Posterior — to Death —
 Initial of Creation, and
 The Exponent of Earth —

(Poem 917; p.432).

Love is definitely the source of all life, the root of all creation. Of all shades of love, the divine love is the most dominant one in Dickinson's poetry.

Miss Emily has also dealt with beauty and truth in her writing. It is here that her aesthetic theory comes out vividly. She responds to beauty and truth in her own original manner. She mentions her own system of aesthetics in the following way :

Butterflies from St. Dominzo
Cruising round the purple line —
Have a system of aesthetics
Far superior to mine.

(Poem 137; p.64).

But she frankly admits that the aesthetics of Nature is far superior to that of her own. This she can say by noticing the great beauty of butterflies and flowers. The poet finds it difficult to define 'beauty' because it is so abstract and complex. This is what she says of beauty :

The Definition of Beauty is
That Definition is none —
Of Heaven, easing Analysis,
Since Heaven and He are one.

(Poem 988; p.460).

The indefinable nature of beauty is identified with God and Heaven. Occasionally the poet feels pain and misery by looking at objects of beauty, because they usually tend to be fragile and transient, such as a lily or a

butterfly. And though beauty is generally found to be so, it always inspired and pleased the poet. She was even prepared to 'die for beauty'.

Dickinson was equally attracted towards truth. She seeks beauty and truth through the medium of poetry, and in this respect she is just like John Keats, the well-known Romantic poet. In his poem "Ode on a Grecian Urn", Keats writes :

'Beauty is truth, truth beauty', — that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.¹³

Similarly, Dickinson combined these two elements — beauty and truth — in her poetry, as an imaginative poet should. They constitute the quintessence of her poetic art or of her aesthetics. In one of her poems, she tries to identify truth with God :

Truth — is as old as God —
His Twin identity
And will endure as long as He
A Co-Eternity —
And perish on the Day
Himself is borne away
From Mansion of the Universe
A lifeless Deity.
(Poem 836, p.404).

That is what the seers and philosophers also say. But they arrive at this realization through their intuition or logic. The poet comes to the same realization by means of poetry.

A brief survey of these various themes to be found in Dickinson's poetry convinces us that she was as much of a Romantic poet as a Transcendentalist or a Metaphysician. Her treatment of Nature, life and death, time and eternity and immortality, of love and beauty and truth, establishes a clear-cut link with the Romantic poets. Though it would not be proper to call her a Romantic poet having no other concerns in letters and life, she is undeniably a poet embed with Romantic sensibility. This is how Henry W. Wells reacts to her :

In short, to her contacts with the Romantic Age she owed a small but very definite part of her artistic success; and much the greater part of her by no means fatal faults. Her devotion to "eternity" may have been due in part to a distrust ... of the dominating fashions of her times.¹⁴

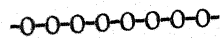
Not only Dickinson's themes (as broadly examined in Chapter III) but also her poetic art; her consecration of pain and ecstasy (as seen in Chapter IV), her employment of images and symbols (as considered in Chapter V), her egotistic or subjective strain, her lyricism (as least as found in some of her inspired poems), establish her claim to be a poet of Romantic sensibility.¹⁵ A streak of pain and joy, bordering on ecstasy, also lends support to this claim. Therefore, we may say that Emily Dickinson is a poet of the Romantic tradition, at least in some measure, and that her claim as Romantic poet is quite tenable and judicious.

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- 1) Conrad Aiken, "Introduction", Quoted Poems of Emily Dickinson (New York : The Modern Library, n.d.), p.xi.
- 2) Ibid
- 3) Henry W.Wells, "Romantic Sensibility", Emily Dickinson : A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Richard B.Sewall (Englewood Cliffs, N.J. : Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963), p.45.
- 4) Ibid
- 5) Archibard Macleish, "The Private World", The Recognition of Emily Dickinson : Selected Criticism Since 1890, eds. Caesar R.Blake & Carlton F.Wells (Ann Arbor : The University of Michigan Press, 1964) p.309.
- 6) F.O. Malthessen, "The Private Poet : Emily Dickinson", The Recognition of Emily Dickinson, p.230.
- 7) Ibid
- 8) Conrad Aiken, "Introduction", Selected Poems of Emily Dickinson (New York : The Modern Library, 1924), p. xiii.
- 9) Ibid., p. xv.
- 10) Robert Browning, "ospice", Fifteen Poets, Indian rpt., 7th impr. (Calcutta Oxford University Pres, 1985), p.442.

- 11) Salamatullah Khan, Emily Dickinson's Poetry : The Flood Subjects (New Delhi : Aarti Book Centre, 1969), p.124.
- 12) George F. Whicher, This Was a Poet : A Critical Biography of Emily Dickinson (Ann Arbor : The University of Michigan Press, 1957), p.269.
- 13) John Keats, "Ode on a Grecian Urn", Fifteen Poets, 1985 ed., p.359.
- 14) Henry W. Wells, loc.cit., p.50.
- 15) Ibid., p.46.

—— Henry conscious aims to retain the fresh imagination of childhood to celebrate the self, to praise nature, and to indulge freely in fancy, stood among the most conspicuous ideals in the literature of her century. ... In no respect did she comply more closely than in cultivating the richest and most conspicuous vein in romantic thought as a whole, namely the new sensibility."



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